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A Book-Length Western Action Novel By

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Second April Number

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Vol. XLI SECOND APRIL NUMBER No. 4

COVER DESIGN, "THE GLORY TRAIL".....Arthur R. Mitchell

A Complete Novel

DAKOTA PAYS IN FULL.....Ralph Cummins 487
Dakota and the deadliest of Lone Star gunmen meet on the lead-lined trail of two dry-gulching double-crossers.

Short Stories

UTAH FOLLOWS THROUGH.....Nels Leroy Jorgensen 537
Rio Taylor faces death on the trail of a gun-fanged desert snake.

THE OLD HOKUM BUCKET.....Bud Jones 548
Ask "Flash" Bernstein if tiger epiglottis juice ain't good for leather laryngitis!

FOR LOVE OF MIKE.....William P. Livengood 559
Pierre Le Borget races against treachery in the great Nome dog-sled Derby.

KILLER KANE'S BOAST.....James W. Egan 565
Mark Badger plays a hand in Hell's Junction with a man who "wouldn't be taken alive."

CONFIDENCE.....J. R. Johnston 573
Crossed forks of gun-lightning burn a sheriff-killer with the brand of death.

FROZEN ROADS.....John Beames 581
Stinging his lumberjacks to epic effort 'mid bitter cold, Ray Gower wreaks his will on the Northwood's forest and laughs at his hated enemy.

A Serial Novel

GUN COUNTRY.....William Colt MacDonald 592
A Six-Part Western Novel—Part Two.

Special Features

TIES THAT BIND.....George F. Meeter 485
A prospector poem.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE..... 580

THE COUNTRY STORE..... 615
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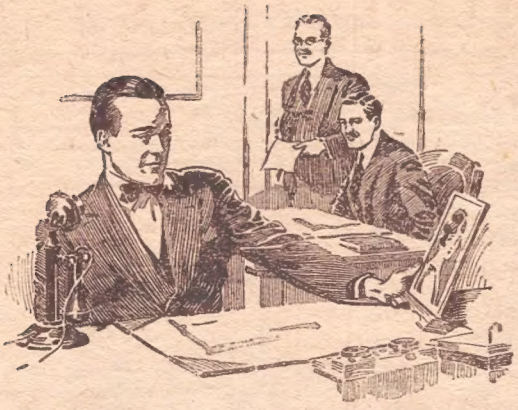

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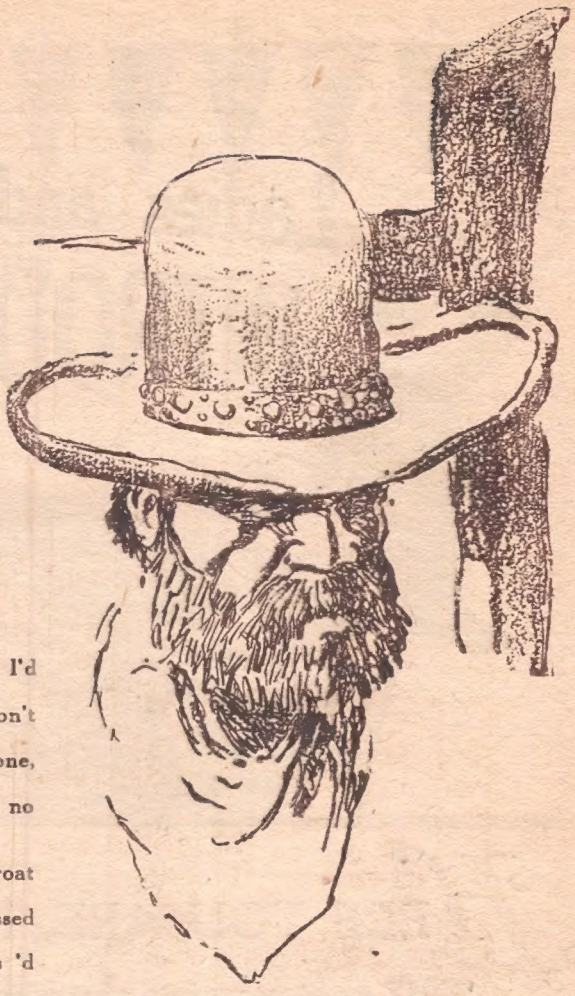
By George F. Meeter



SAY, stranger, got a match? Thanks, I'd
do th' same f'r you.
What's that—c'mon an' likker up? Wal, don't
keer ef I do.
That shorely hit th' spot; won'cha have one,
pard, on me?
Hey, barkeep, set 'em up ag'in; it ain't no
wuss'n tea!

Yep, that there buck's me last, but my throat
wuz kinda dry
From sniffin' f'r the past six months this cussed
alkali.
I reckon yores would, too, an' yore lungs 'd
like t' bust
Ef you'd 'a' breathed ez long ez me this pesky
desert dust.

I'll give you some advice, though a durn ol'
fool I be,
Don't never take the desert trail—'cause why?
Jus' look at me!
M' j'ints need 'ilin' bad—why, sometimes I'm
almost lame,
Yuh s'pose I'd be this ailin' ef th' desert wa'n't
t' blame?

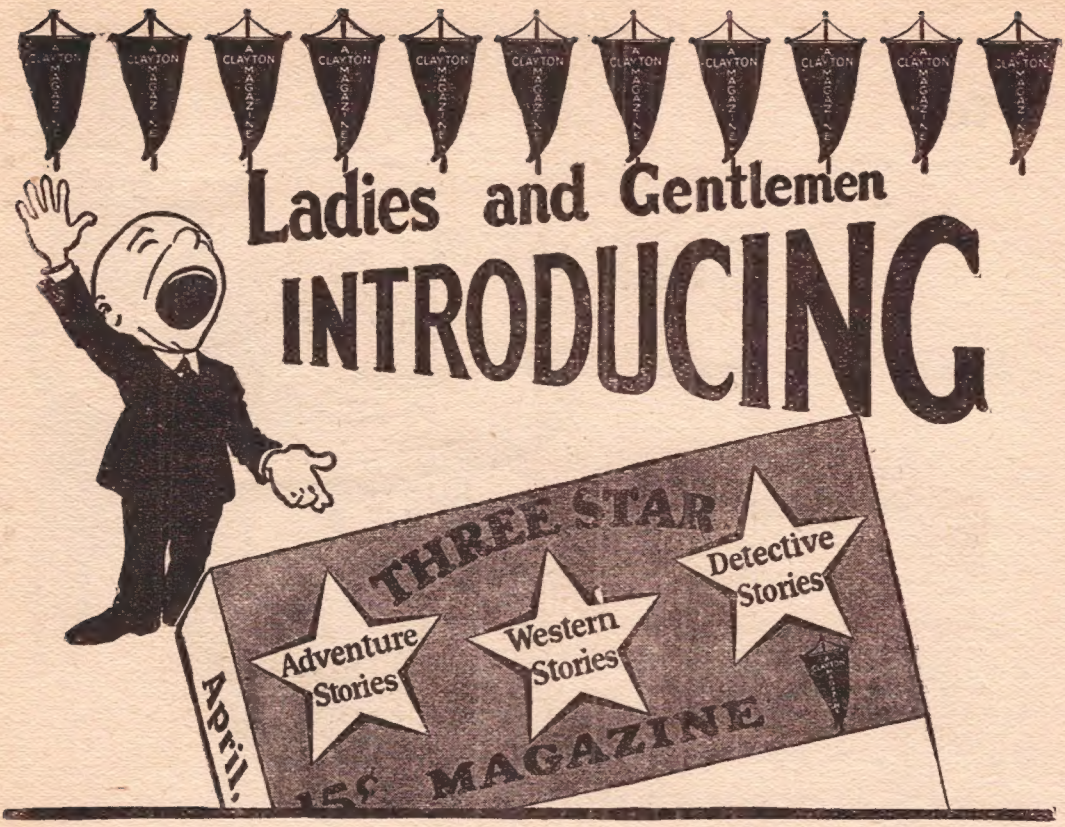
I bet yuh're thinkin' now that I'm twice ez old
ez you;
But mister, I'm a-bettin' yo're the older uv us
two!
It wa'n't so long ago, neither, sence I had m'
prime,
But sand 'n' sun 'n' weather makes men old
afore their time.

An' disapp'intment too, when yuh thinks yuh
struck it rich,
An' find it's only pyrite gold, er single streaks
'n' sich;
When all the mother lodes seem to hide an'
dodge yore pick,
That's wuss 'n all the others put t'gether f'r
a trick!

I'm sick uv eatin' beans; yes, an' jerky's jest
ez bad,
O' course, now, water's purty good—when
red-eye cain't be had!
But trompin' through th' sun, in the blazin',
scorchin' heat,
With nary thing t' look at 'ceptin' cactus,
sage, 'n' 'squite!

An' more'n likely, too, jest awaitin' in th' sky
A orn'ry buzzard hopin' soon t' pick yore
bones clean dry;
Or plowin' through a storm, with the sand
a-whirlin' past—
Say, brother, that's plumb hell, t' face that
roarin' cuttin' blast!

Jest reckon I'm 'bout through—I'd be crazy
goin' back;
I aims tuh sell muh whole blame outfit, picks,
'n' pans, 'n' jack. . . .
What's that yo're sayin', pard—think ye'd like
to stake me in?
Wal—s'pose I could go back this once 'n' try
muh luck ag'in.



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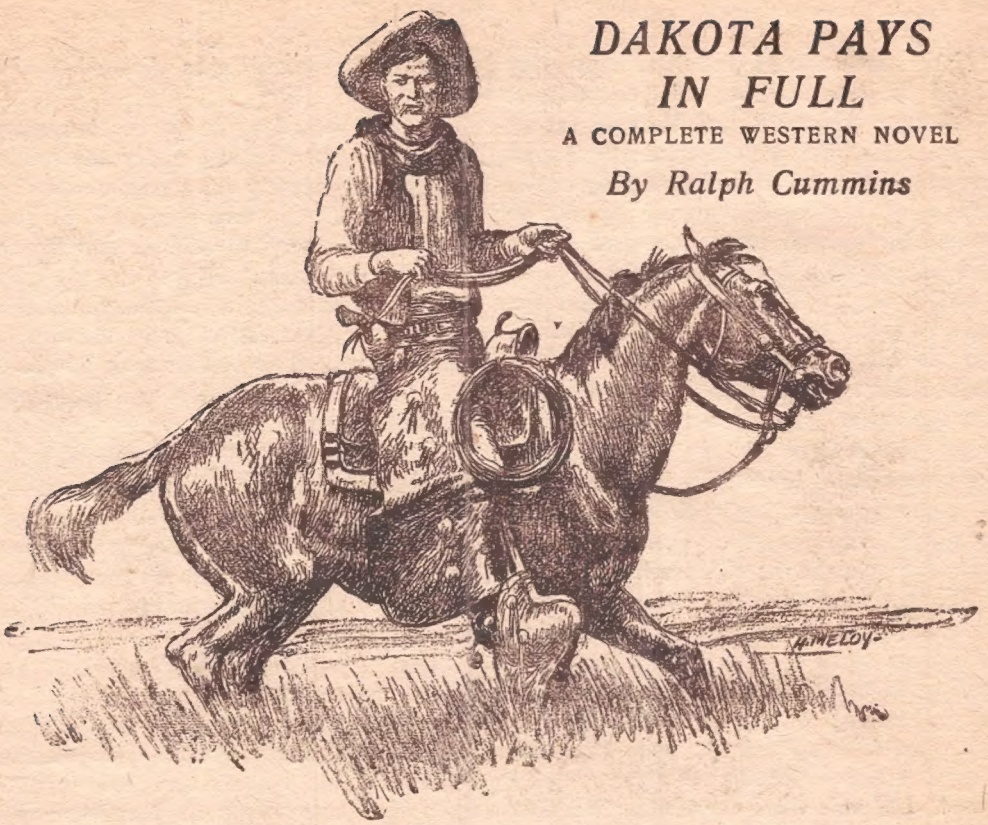
DAKOTA PAYS IN FULL

A COMPLETE WESTERN NOVEL

By Ralph Cummins



Dakota and the deadliest of Lone Star gunmen meet on the lead-lined trail of two dry-gulching double-crossers.

CHAPTER I

DRY-GULCHED

DURING three bright September days, Dakota had been traveling leisurely southward from War-dance, Wyoming, stopping noon and night at ranches along the way and mixing in comradely yarning with members of his puncher tribe. Some of these cow country men, sizing their guest's dandified range garb and the ornate trappings of his white-footed bay pony, grinned, and wondered how far this adventuring dude kid would go before he turned tail to tear back to his mother. Others, who had listened to Dakota's talk, saw in this fresh-faced, smiling youth a top-hand son of the range. Still others, recognizing the boyish rider, prophesied a pot of trouble brewing in the south.

Dakota was a cowboy—with a side-line, but just now he was a carefree rambler on a vacation jaunt. After three months of inactivity, the result of injuries that still growled their painful reminders in both his arms, Dakota was getting back in trim by taking an easy ride to make a friendly call. Most unusual, however, was this sort of peaceful mission for the innocent-appearing cowboy known as Dakota; almost habitually his riding was toward the mutterings of some range war, his journeys ending in the blare of guns.

All that was past for Dakota—so he had definitely decided. Recent long days of thinking back over a life that seemed to have been one continuous battle, with each day of his future depending upon quick thinking and still quicker guns, had brought resolve. Much too long had he followed his precarious gunman calling; henceforth he would be a puncher, riding a peaceful range. So on this cross-country pilgrimage, Dakota carried a single six-gun on his hip, its sole purpose being to relieve boyish spirits by occasional noisy demonstrations.

Early afternoon of this third happy day found Dakota nearing his destination. With huge white hat well back on tawny curling hair, and with checkerboard shirt and blue silk neckerchief fluttering in the breeze of his sudden racing spurt, he topped the summit of a watershed divide and looked with boyish eagerness into a wooded canyon down which wound the dusty wagon track that he was traveling. On his left stretched a wall of broken cliffs, their tops green with stunted pines. On the other side of the coulee watercourse some five or six rocky points thrust out like giant fingers from the hand of a grassy ridge, their clutching threat seeming to force the slender stream shrinking against the cliff wall.

"That Coulee City'll be down at that widenin'," murmered Dakota, dismounting to tighten cinch for the descent, but continuing to trace the road line down the winding coulee. "Doggone! When I jump that old fellow an' tell him who I am an' why I come— Hello, there's a dust! Fine! I'll wait till I meet them waddies 'fore I smoke."

In an opening half a mile below, two pigmy figures had appeared, moving ahead of a comet's tail of dust. Ever eager for a roadside chat, Dakota caught up his reins and swung his left foot to stirrup, intent on hastening to a meeting with the two riders. But in the act of mounting he stiffened, staring across his horse's back at the rocky tip of a finger point that hung over the road just above the two approaching horsemen.

"What now?" The smile was wiped from the boyish lips, and the fun-crinkled eyes became hard and watchful. "A man layin' over the road—with a rifle. Hold on, White Foot! Better we wait a bit."

Leaning against his horse, the cowboy peered across his saddle at the two men in the road. They were punchers, probably, riding home from a trip to town. But the man watching from the finger-nail of that point! The distance was nearly half a mile, but Dakota's keen eyes could make out a floppy hat above a rifle thrust across a rock. Plainly the man was laying for someone, presumably for the two riders who would pass directly underneath.

Dakota looked again to the horsemen, who had halted almost under the hidden watcher, apparently for a conference. The smaller of the two men pointed to the base of the cliff across the coulee and led the way into the brush. Shortly the two came into sight on foot in a little glade close against the rock wall opposite the skulker on the point. The shorter man burrowed in a mess of brush, his tall companion following close behind.

After a moment the short man knelt and fumbled something from the rocks, a whitish object that appeared to be quite heavy. The tall man stepped back, gesturing toward the road, and his mate, bowed to the side by the thing he carried, led out across the open.

"Diggin' up something," muttered Dakota. "Something they had hid—"

He broke off, wondering, lips tightening. The tall man stumbled, but instead of recovering his balance, he fell forward upon his face. Even as the other man dropped his burden and started to run, the boom of a rifle shot came to Dakota.

Another crashing report drew the cowboy's gaze hastily to the man on the point. A thin spiral of smoke was rising from the rifle, which rested across the rock. Dakota could now distinguish a reddish splotch that suggested shoulders draped with an Indian blanket.

"Kind of a dirty trick," sighed Dakota, and looked again to the scene in the glade. "Uh-huh! Couple fellers diggin' up a cache of some kind. With that bushwacker layin' for 'em."

A third shot brought the short man down just as he was plunging into the cover of an aspen thicket. But he came to his feet, and seemingly dazed and twisted, he staggered back across the glade and dropped to his knees beside his still motionless companion. The wounded man lurched to his feet, a six-gun now glinting in his hand, and lifted his face to the ambush point above. Evidently he sighted the killing menace, for he raised his weapon. Before he could fire, the rifle above spat out a puff of smoke and the short

man slumped down and lay in a lumpy heap upon the ground.

The watching cowboy relaxed and plucked cigarette makings from the pocket of his checkered shirt, his expressionless eyes following the floppy-hatted rifleman as he ran back along the point to a bay horse tied in a clump of brush. This tense drama of death had played through to its grim climax, and except for a single flare of anger over such bushwacking tactics, Dakota had viewed it unmoved. He had seen men shot down in cold blood before, many of them. The trio of characters in this gruesome tragedy were strangers to him, their deadly battling nothing of his affair.

"Plain as big print on a offer reward," he mused. "Slim an' Shorty had a cache of loot. They come tuh dig it up, but that lad above got wise an' took the pot with his pat hand. So he'll be goin' down— Yep, there he comes. Huh! It's funny that little feller didn't have a gun of his own."

The man in the floppy hat and reddish coat, now mounted on a quick-stepping bay that Dakota easily recognized as a Morgan, had appeared half way down the nearer side of the point, and was working through the short brush toward the road. Dakota leaned upon his saddle, smoking, coolly watching. Too long had this youthful gunman ridden the ranges of death to consider intruding in a matter that had all the earmarks of a strictly private outlaw war. He would wait until this killer had secured the white object that the short man had dropped, and had gone. Then Dakota would ride on about his business.

The man on the Morgan dismounted at the road and proceeded on foot to the glade, and to the side of his victims. After a bent-over scrutiny of each of the bodies, he caught up the whitish object, walked down the face of the cliff, and dropped his burden in a jumble of slide rock. Hastily, then, he left the glade, disappeared from Dakota's view in the willows of the coulee bed, bobbed up and ran to his horse. A moment later he had ridden out of sight around the point.

For a bare instant now Dakota was moved to take a hand, his slight inclination in that direction being born of recent experiences on the side of the law. But at once the urge to stalk the killer passed. Even were he now an officer, Dakota could find no sensible reason for attempting to stop the man on the bay horse. The tragic incident he had witnessed was wholly an outlaw affair. Two artists of the mask and gun, securing their hidden loot, had been ambushed and killed by another of the same stripe, possibly a pal whom they had double-crossed.

Had not the road he was following passed within a short distance of that glade of death, Dakota would have gone whistling and uncurious on his way. He knew that as a good citizen he should report this killing, but that would mean being held as a witness, which was an annoying prospect for a vacationing cowboy. Some passing rider would notice the two saddled horses and — That thought drew Dakota's attention to the horses as he rode under the finger tip of the ambush point.

The horses were tied on the coulee brink in plain sight of the road, but the two bodies in the glade across the creek might escape the notice of a passerby. Dakota halted, looked up and down, rode aside the two animals and dismounted. Then he lead the big buckskin that had been ridden by the tall man down a steep cow trail and across the little creek to where the dead men lay. He selected a spot that was in easy view from the other horse, and tied the buckskin to a scrubby pine, thus making certain the discovery of those bodies by the first curious rider who passed.

As he turned away Dakota looked with considerable interest at the killer's victims. The short man, with his companion's six-gun still clutched in his hand, lay with blood-smeared face upturned. The other had fallen to a position that might have been that of sleep, his head pillowed upon his arm, his hat tilted as if to shade his face from the sun.

It struck Dakota then that even while he side-stepped the responsibility of reporting this tragedy, he could aid the law by a

very simple act. He could make sure that the killer did not profit by his double murder. After a short search Dakota found the rock-screened hole into which he had seen the floppy-hatted man drop the white object, and dragged out a small canvas sack, upon the dirt-soiled side of which was stenciled: "First State Bank of Red Plains, Wyoming." The sack was heavy with what a feeling examination convinced the cowboy were rolls of coins, probably twenty dollar gold pieces. A tag had been torn from the sack, but the hard wax seal of the express company was still unbroken on the slender wires twisted round its mouth.

Rather anxious to get rid of this stolen money, Dakota hurried on down the cliff wall, found a crevice well screened by hackberry vines and hid the sack. Then, after making sure that he had left no betraying footprints, he again headed for his horse, chuckling with relief at suddenly remembering his mission to this country.

"Why, sure! I'll jest tell Mac all about this. If he's anyways like he usta be, he sure won't lock me up for a witness."

In passing the saddled horse he had led across the creek, the cowboy glanced at it in the manner habitual to a man always interested in good horseflesh. The buckskin was a long, rangy animal, showing the effects of generous feeding and a horse-lover's care, and was equipped with an old stock saddle. Dakota paused, wondering if the saddle held some identfiying mark, debating if he should look it over. That would be the sheriff's job, he decided, and was starting on when his final glance fell upon the stirrup fender.

The cowboy halted in the awkward pose of one foot up in stepping. His eyes widened and little creases puckered his forehead. Still staring, he moved forward, dropping his face close to a hole cut in the leather. Moving as if in a daze, he rounded the horse, studying the saddle, and returned to that knife-cut hole in the stirrup fender.

"Was it the off side?" he muttered, his eyes glazed and unseeing as they sought to reconstruct some scene from the distant past. "Yes, an' this cut is old." Again he examined the knife-cut crack, probing it with a finger that trembled.

With jerky, stumbling stride, Dakota crossed the glade and knelt beside the body of the tall man who had ridden the buckskin. A bright object, partly concealed under the dead man's arm, caught his gaze. He lifted the shoulder and revealed upon the open vest the silver star of a sheriff. Very tenderly then he slipped a hand under the arm-pillowed face and turned it toward him. He saw the furrowed features of an oldish man with crow-footed eyes, and a mouth that even in death held its humorous upward quirk.

Only one who had known Dakota long and intimately would have observed anything of reaction in his expressionless face as he straightened slowly to look down at the dead officer. Yet deep back in his half-closed eyes were mingled the tears of emotion and the flames of killing rage.

"Dan McCarroll!" He spoke in a choking whisper. "I knew it—when I seen that saddle. Sheriff Mac! An' jest when I was figgerin' tuh pay my debt. I oughta hunted him up years ago."

Dakota settled upon his heels, plucked a small knife from his pocket and opened its slender blade. With fingers quite steady now, he clipped a twig from a bush and began trimming it, his narrowed eyes darting to the other dead man.

"Uh-huh! I didn't read the sign quite right. A prisoner, this Shorty, mebbe brought from jail tuh show where he hid a haul. Yeah, here's the handcuffs." He patted the hip pocket of the dead sheriff. "An' he wasn't packin' a gun. But that—that bushwackin' devil in the red coat!"

The cowboy looked now to the point upon which the killer had lurked, but his eyes saw nothing. Of his whole tense body, only his fingers moved, whittling mechanically at the twig.

At last Dakota rose, looked sadly down at the lifeless form of the sheriff, and crossed the coulee to his horse. But he did not mount at once. With hands as steady as some machine, he untied a roll from back of his saddle and produced from it a cartridge belt rolled round a hol-

stered six-gun. Deftly, he belted this gun upon his hip, and adjusted it with its mate to sagging positions against his thighs. Coolly, he unwound whang strings from the bottoms of the two holsters and tied them round his legs.

He mounted, then, and reined White Foot to where he had seen the bay horse await its rider. The tracks were plain in the sandy soil. Dakota rolled a cigarette and lighted it, settled his white hat upon his tawny hair and guided his horse out upon the trail of the Morgan.

Dakota smiled as he followed the tracks. But it was a strangely different smile from that worn by the carefree, vacationing youth. For Dakota's resolve to become a peaceful puncher had met the changing barrier of fate. Again he was the cold gunman, riding grimly to a meeting with death.

CHAPTER II

"PITCH 'EM!"

THE dusk of evening found Dakota returning to the road he had left two hours before to follow the trail of the bay horse. He was now several miles below the scene of the tragedy; the coulee had disappeared in a wide, cultivated valley, dotted with haystacks and ranch buildings and criss-crossed with fences. The cowboy halted to study the muddle of hoof prints in the dust of the road.

"Doggone!" he exclaimed disgustedly. "After doin' a job of trailin' that was the best ever, here I lose my man right on the edge of town. No chance tuh pick that track when these buggies an' hawsses been churnin' up the road. But I got me a clue," he added hopefully, glancing at his roll behind.

Although he had failed to come up with the cold-blooded killer, Dakota had indeed found a clue. He had stopped to investigate a spot where his quarry had dismounted, and had followed bootprints into a mess of greasewood. Carefully hidden there he had found the floppy hat and a reddish mackinaw made from an Indian blanket. With this evidence wrapped in his slicker roll, and with the trail of the killer leading straight into the town ahead, Dakota still had reason to be hopeful.

"He's somebody that lives right here," mused the cowboy. "Had a change of funny clothes along tuh fool anybody that might get a far-off look at him up around that point. But he didn't have a change of hawsses. An' that good Morgan he was ridin' sure showed up strong. Gosh, it's gettin' cold. Guess I'll put on my coat."

He swung round, untied his roll and dragged out a heavy, gray, canvas coat, which he donned rather awkwardly because of the stiffness of his still sore arms. Ahead, the road dropped down a long slope to a huddle of buildings in the narrowing mouth of a platter-shaped valley that extended in fenced fields of alfalfa and grain stubble far up to the right. Dakota was admiring a large stone ranch house below a group of painted outbuildings when he became aware of a rider approaching at a wild gallop.

At once Dakota became the innocent traveler, riding at ease, a most deceptive figure, especially as his two guns were wholly concealed under his coat. With mild curiosity he eyed the hump-backed, oldish man who was racing a half-wild pinto up the road, and chuckled when he observed that the man's bald head was bare, that he wore one six-gun at his hip, had another strung by the belt to his saddle horn, and carried a rifle under his arm.

"Hi!" The shiny-headed man with the arsenal dragged his mount to a plowing halt, his head snapping forward as a result of the quick stop. "Wait a minnit, kid! Aw, dang yore calico hide tuh hell an'-gone!" He yanked at the side-stepping pinto, who danced on to a snorting collision with White Foot. "Say," he burst out after another round-and-around session with his mount, "didya see anything of a coupla fellers ridin' down this way?"

Dakota shook his head, quieting White Foot with a patting hand, and eyeing a deputy's badge upon the old rider's shirt pocket.

"I jest come into the road through them ranches," he explained. "By way of twenty-'leven gates. Them two must be

dang' bad from the artillery yuh're packin."

"Hell, no! It was jest my boss an' a pris'ner. They oughta been in two hours ago. I gotta hussle on an' meet Mac, an' tell him— Say, you a stranger aroun' here?"

"Kinda," replied Dakota, saddened by the thought that this deputy would never in life meet again the man he was seeking. "Do yuh arrest strangers in this man's country? Or— Say, I got a hunch. Did yuh ever happen tuh meet up with Andy Clausen over at Wardance?"

"Did I?" howled the deputy, puckering his wizened face into a happy grimace. "Jest lissen to me feller! I knowed Andy 'fore you was borned, kid. We rid together over in the Buffalo country. An' I depitied for him two-three years up at Wardance. Yuh know him?"

"Yeah," drawled Dakota. "An' he mentioned I might find a old scorpion named Baldy Scobel over thisaway. My name's Dakota," he added, extending his hand. "Mebbe yuh've heard of me."

"Dakoty!" The deputy's eyes became saucers. "B'gosh, yes! I've heerd of you. A good thing, too, 'cause right now I'd 'a' tooken yuh for a pitcher outa a saddle store catalogue. But I know! Mac an' me talks lots about that clean-up yuh made in the Black Hills las' summer. Glad tuh meetcha, Dakoty." He nearly fell sidewise out of his saddle in reaching for the cowboy's hand.

Dakota sighed with relief and thankfulness. Here was the source of reliable information that he badly needed, a man he could trust on the say-so of a mutual friend, Sheriff Clausen.

"I'd 'most forgot that Andy said I'd mebbe find yuh here, Baldy. I was thinkin' more about runnin' onto old Dan McCarroll. An' now—" Dakota hesitated, seeking to postpone the sad duty that confronted him. "But why yuh so worried? Can't Mac bring in a prisoner by hisself?"

"Hell, yes!" Scobel's plaintive eyes darted furtively over his shoulder. "But this is plumb different. Yuh see, Mac brought a feller from the pen to go find a cache of loot. This Madden stuck up a stage at Devil's Claw 'most ten years ago, killed the driver an' got five thousand in gold twenties that the 'spress company was shippin' to the bank at Red Plains. That hold-up hid his haul, but he got caught right quick an' sent up for life. He wouldn't tell where he cached that stuff till jest recent, when the 'spress company talked him into it, an' had Mac go git him an' bring him here to show where it was hid."

"Uh-huh," nodded Dakota. "I see— how it was."

"Folks had a hunch that this Madden bandit didn't give his right name," continued Scobel. "He was a sullen cuss, not talkin' a-tall 'cept when he'd bust out in threats about what'd happen tuh ev'rybody connected. An' now I see what he meant. Yessir!" The deputy lowered his voice to a tense whisper. "They's a bunch of hard-lookers in town right now—figgerin' tuh pull this Madden convict out, I'll bet! That's what I wanta tell Mac."

"I wonder now?" Dakota looked back up the gloomy canyon that wound under those sinister points. "Mebbe that was it —an' mebbe not. Devil's Claw, huh? That's a right fit name for that spooky hole. Well, I got a hard wallop for yuh, Baldy. Yuh won't be meetin' Mac—not any more."

"Huh?" The old deputy's mouth dropped open, then it closed to grim tightening, while his eyes narrowed to smouldering cracks. "Yuh mean—they got him?"

"Somebody got him," replied Dakota sadly. "Bushwacked him from a hide-out on one of them Devil's Claws. I seen it. But it wasn't exactly like yuh s'picion. The kiyote that done it wasn't out tuh get this Madden away. He was after that five thousand loot. He laid up on a rock an' killed 'em both."

Baldy Scobel chewed at his lips and winced; then he slowly straightened in his saddle, seeming to swell up for an outburst of rage or grief. But to Dakota's surprise, he spoke quite calmly.

"So you was a friend of Mac's?"

"Yeah, I had good reason tuh call him

a friend," sighed the cowboy. "An' I was comin' tuh see Mac—tuh make him feel good by tellin' him— Yuh see, Mac wouldn't 'a' knowed me. We never met but once, an' that was years ago. He'd never connect up the fool kid I was then with—with the gun-fighter they call Dakota. But I owed Mac something—a debt I never can pay—now."

"Talk about a lucky break!" exploded Scobel. "Dakoty right on deck—an' a friend of Mac's—an' owin' him suthin'. I'd hate tuh be in that killer's boots."

I'll get that killer," murmured Dakota. "But that won't pay the kinda debt I owe Dan McCarroll."

"Aw, yuh—Ho! Yuh wall-eyed sonuvagun!" Scobel cracked the restless pinto on the rump with his rifle. "Well, I'm lookin' tuh you tuh boss this thing, Dakoty. Do we go—go get Mac's body first—or git a posse?"

"Neither one—jest now. Better I don't let on for a spell that I seen that killin'. I want tuh look around innocent. I got a little something tuh go on—something that tells me we mebbe won't have tuh chase the hills. I'm hankerin' tuh get into town an' size up them fellers yuh're suspicious of. Likely, one of them was crooked enough tuh sneak off an' pull that killin'. Any other strangers in town besides that bunch?"

"No—that is, none come recent. They's a Texas feller been hangin' aroun' for a week—playin' good poker an' askin' everybody where is they a little ranch he can buy. But the three bad eggs jest showed up—since Mac pulled out with that Madden."

Scobel appeared quite satisfied to leave all of the responsibility to this youthful cowboy, and without a further word he turned his snorting pinto. Dakota swung in beside the deputy and the two rode down the gloomy defile of an old cowtown's single street.

"That's a mighty fine ranch up there," remarked Dakota, indicating the dark splotch of the big stone house that lay just below a long stretch of cultivated fields. "Say, ain't them Morgans?" He peered at a bunch of horses in a pasture.

"Yep, Joe Callas is a nut for blooded hosses an' fancy stock in general." Scobel now forgot his grief in a swelling of civic pride. "Biggest man in these parts, Joe Callas is. Runnin' for state senator, an' he'll git ev'ry vote in this county."

"I've heard Andy Clausen spoutin' about this Callas for senator," said Dakota. "Andy's pullin' for him, on account of this Callas gettin' a friend of his outa trouble."

"That's Joe ev'ry time!" spluttered Scobel. "Allus workin' to git some poor devil another chance. Jest like Mac thataway. Why, them two usta have a session ev'ry time Mac would pull a bandit—an' decide if the lad was tuh go to the pen—or git staked outa the country."

"I have reason tuh understand that," murmured Dakota, "as tuh Dan McCarroll." He squinted thoughtfully over his shoulder, at the Morgan horses. "This Callas seems tuh be right prosperous."

"Rich! That's the finest ranch this side of Sheridan. An' he earned it, Joe did, all by hard work an' brainy figgerin'. Why, ten year ago Joe Callas didn't have nuthin'—'cept a sixty-a-month job as 'spress agent. But he saved his money, bought a int'rest in the liv'ry stable an' the stage line, an' then got him a big freight outfit. Purty soon he bought this ranch in dabs, an' built it up like yuh see."

"An' he was a good friend of Mac's," mused Dakota. "But them Morgans."

"You bet they was friends! Joe got Mac in as sheriff, an' promised tuh git him the warden job at the pen. But the way them two worked together makin' good citizens outa bad eggs! Not that Mac ever got squeamish over the real bad ones—he was hard-boiled with them. Callas wasn't quite so keen at sizin' 'em, but mostly he took Mac's judgment. Only time he didn't—" Scobel snorted disgustedly.

"—They shore argued that time. It was 'most year back. Strange feller named Gillman got in a jangle with a Box R puncher an' 'most beat that pore rannie tuh death. Mac jugged this Gillman, but Joe Callas come along an' got mushy 'cause Gillman claimed tuh be a top-notch

hoss man. It ended up with Callas talkin' Mac into lettin' him give that fist-fightin' devil a job on the ranch. Now this Gillman is the Callas foreman, an' he's got a crony of his in as boss nurse for them fancy Morgans."

"I'll have tuh see this Callas," said Dakota. "Huh! Morgan hawsses!" He shrugged, and turned attention to the town into which they were riding.

In the twilight dusk, relieved by the faint glow from several kerosene lamps and lanterns hanging over the plank sidewalk, Dakota saw two ragged lines of stone and frame buildings. On the left, stores alternated with saloons as if each business required a bumper against its competitive neighbor. The "Cowmen's Hotel" occupied a barn-like frame structure on the right. Just beyond the hotel a sign above the sidewalk designated a small stone building as the "Coulee City Express Office and Stage Station. Freight Hauled Anywhere." Dakota observed an obstruction in front of the express office and swung White Foot into the middle of the street to avoid it. This was a pole rail fastened across two iron posts, a protecting guard for a sunken scales used for weighing freight and stock.

"Need a drink?" asked Scobel, jerking his bald head toward a well-lighted saloon opposite the express office. "That's Sam Gowan's 'Novelty'."

"Not now," refused Dakota, his attention going to three puncher-garbed men who were talking on the saloon porch. "Yuh know them three? They're sure sizin' us."

"You bet!" Scobel leaned toward Dakota and spoke in low tones. "That's the bunch I was scared of. They rode in right after noon. Plumb strangers. Pinky Layman, who runs the Cowmen's Hotel, slipped me the tip that they was askin', careless, about this Madden convict bein' in town."

Dakota looked past the deputy to the three men, his scrutiny becoming more intent as he observed their growing interest in Scobel and himself. A lumpy-shouldered giant, so large that he made his two mates look like boys, twisted his head to continue his view of the men in the street. Light falling now upon the big man's face, revealed to Dakota a fearfully protruding jaw and a black splotch round the right eye, physical defects that reminded the cowboy of a comic-picture bulldog.

A short distance past the express office, Scobel angled to the right and halted before a squat stone jail. Beyond loomed the square bulk of the courthouse. As the deputy led down the side of the jail he looked a little uneasily over his shoulder toward the lighted part of the town.

"I don't like the looks of them three a-tall," he muttered, and halted at a well to draw water by means of a rope that squeaked through a dry pulley. "We'll put up the hosses—then eat. I left a mess of ham an' cabbage cookin'."

"An' it's doin' some good advertisin'," sighed Dakota, sniffing hungrily as he followed Scobel to a stable in the rear. "I'm able tuh take on a healthy gob of that."

The horses watered, unsaddled and fed, Dakota hunched his slicker roll under his arm and accompanied the deputy into a rough board lean-to that straggled out from the rear wall of the jail. This may have been a woodshed or storage room originally, but now it was fitted up with a cookstove and a cot tumbled with blankets.

"Here's where I live," said Scobel. "Mac stopped up at the hotel, but I hafta stick close here. I like this fine, 'cept when I hafta cook for pris'ners. That ain't often though," he added cheerfully.

"Mac didn't have no folks?" inquired Dakota, investigating a tin basin and an empty water bucket.

"Nope, he never got married. Dang' good thing, too. 'Stead of dancin' aroun' tuh some woman's naggin', he was able tuh do good for a lotta poor rannies."

Dakota unbuckled his belts and tossed them on a chair, removed his canvas coat, fetched a bucket of water from the well, and proceeded to wash. Scobel scowled into his mulligan kettle, poked wood into the stove and dumped two handfuls of coffee into a black pot. Then he pawed over a clutter of dirty dishes on the table, finally selecting two plates that were a little less smeared than the others.

"I shore gotta wash these dishes tomorry," sighed the deputy. "I was thinkin' Mac would be here to-night tuh help me clean up. An' now he won't—"

"Pitch 'em!" came the snapping order from the gloom outside the kitchen door. "Up with 'em, sher'ff! Git his gun, Madden."

Baldy Scobel, wise from much experience with desperate characters, promptly lifted his hands. Dakota started to do likewise, then realized that the man in the door was addressing him as Madden. The cowboy continued to wipe an ear with the dirty towel as the speaker advanced into the room. Dakota recognized him as the big man he had noticed in front of the saloon, and observed now that the blackish disfigurement round his right eye was a purple birthmark.

"It's all right, Madden." The intruder was addressing Dakota, but his gun and eyes held upon Scobel as he stepped aside to allow the entrance of his two mates. "The boss slipped up some way, but we was right on the job. Git the sher'ff's gun, Sonora."

A dapper little man, with the dark skin and gaudy raiment of a Mexican, sidled in with cat-like tread and drew Scobel's six-gun from its holster. The third member of the stick-up trio, a fat, greasy-faced man, edged toward the stove, his little pig eyes upon the deputy's supper pot.

"What'n'ell!" mumbled Scobel, grimacing plaintively at Dakota. "These fellers think—"

"Take it easy, Mac!" interrupted Dakota hastily, realizing now that these men were mistaking Scobel and himself for McCarroll and his prisoner. "He figgered tuh ketch us up the road, did he?" This was addressed to the face-splotched leader.

"Tex was to meet us jes' outa town, an' we was goin' up the road to wait for you an' the sher'ff. Tex didn't show up. So when we seen you folks ride in, we figgered to do the little job here. Now, that stuff you went after, Madden. Didn't I sure see that tied onto the back of yore saddle?"

CHAPTER III

The Gunman from Texas

DAKOTA was doing some fast thinking as he faced those three, whom he easily placed as outlaw gunmen of the worst breed. The man they called Tex had brought these men to assist in the rescue of the convict Madden, so the cowboy reasoned. Evidently none of the three knew Madden by sight, and in the dusk, and with Dakota's guns hidden under his coat, they had mistaken the cowboy and the deputy for the sheriff and his prisoner. But this Tex! It looked to Dakota as if the boss of this outfit had ditched his men, possibly planning to effect the rescue alone. Or he may have had a wholly different purpose in mind. Why, Tex may have been that bushwacking killer!

"We'll have tuh wait for Tex," said Dakota, hoping that his warning glance to Scobel had been understood. "Yuh sure he didn't figger tuh do the job alone?"

"If he did!" growled Purple Eye angrily. "After the promises he made. Aw, t'hell with you!"he sneered at Scobel, who was listening with his mouth open. "Lissen yore fool head off—it won't buy you nothin'. It was this way, Kid," he explained to Dakota. "Tex got me an' Porky an' Sonora to come help him. All Tex wanted was to git you loose, so he said us three could have the little haul that you cached. But it looks now—You say you got the stuff all right?" A whitish eye glared from its purple field at Dakota, while its normal mate seemed to dart about the room.

"Yeah," drawled Dakota, relieved that Scobel had apparently grasped the mistake of these three, and was standing pat. "Yuh boys sure done your job fine, an' I reckon Tex'll be right tickled. But I didn't hear about this deal with you, so yuh can't expect me to do anything till he shows up."

Purple Eye glowered suspiciously, his bulldog jaw out-thrust. The slender Sonora fondled his six-gun, and flashed his black-eyed smile from Scobel to Dakota. The hog-faced fat man turned happily

from tracing a savory odor to the stew pot.

"What-say we eat?" he suggested. "I ain't et since—"

"For 'most a hour," snorted the giant leader. "You can stand it a while, Porky. Now, Kid!" He shoved his great jaw out at Dakota. "It looks to me like your pal Tex was up to something phony. Even if he is the slickest gun-shark in Texas, he can't put nuthin' over on Bull Stutt. I wanta know did you bring in what you went after?"

Dakota had retreated until he stood beside the chair upon which lay his holstered guns concealed under his coat. In that position he knew that he could raise this siege at any time; yet he hesitated. He could see in this mistake-inspired hold-up no danger to Scobel or himself. So he was playing for time, wondering hopefully if this Tex might not appear. Stronger all the time was growing the cowboy's suspicion that Tex had been the murderous rifleman on the Devil's Claw.

"Yeah, we got it all right," replied Dakota. "Say, did you fellers ride up here from down south?"

"Clean from Texas?" sniffed Bull Stutt, the purple-eyed leader. "Hell, no! Tex brought us up on the train."

"Yuh oughta have hawsses for the getaway." Dakota's hook was baited for Morgan horses.

"We got good horses," sniffed Stutt. "Tex bought 'em off'n a rancher close to town. Real Morgans."

"An' is Tex ridin' one of them Morgans?"

"Sure. Say, what's the idee of all this fool talk? Tryin' to git my mind off—Aw, there it is!" Stutt advanced to Dakota's slicker roll lying on the floor, kicked and scattered its contents, which consisted mostly of a red blanket coat and a hat whose brim was loosely threaded with a whang string. "Hell, it ain't there!"

"Of course it ain't." Dakota set himself for the action that he felt was near. "Yuh think the sheriff would be loony enough tuh bring that money right in here?"

"Hid it, did he? You seen where?" Stutt became quite eager. "Up Devil's Claw way?"

"Up thataway," nodded Dakota. "I didn't see jest where. He handcuffed me to a tree while he hid it."

"He did, huh?" Stutt thrust his fearsome bulldog jaw at Scobel, and waved his mates toward the deputy's rear. "You got right good sense, sher'ff? Then you'll tell us where— No, com'on! We'll go up there right now."

For an instant the attention of all three went to Scobel. They had no suspicion that they were thus making a serious mistake until Dakota spoke.

"I don't reckon he can help you. Nope, don't jump aroun'!" Dakota winced as a twinge of pain shot to his recently disabled shoulder from the hand that clutched his six-gun. "I don't like the way yuh're ridin' Tex, big feller— Don't yuh!" he cautioned Stutt. "Drop your guns—all of yuh! Now—lift 'em!"

"What the hell!" mumbled Stutt. "Something stinkin' here." But he dropped his gun and raised his hands, as did the others.

"Purty slick, Dakoty!" chortled the deputy, diving for his gun which had been tossed on the cot. "Better we lock 'em up, hey?"

"Dakoty!" howled Stutt, glaring at the cowboy. "A trick! This ain't Kid Madden. An' Bal' Head ain't the sher'ff. You tricked us!" he bellowed at Dakota.

"Yuh tricked yourselves," chuckled Dakota. "It ain't our fault yuh thought we was somebody else. Get aroun' against the wall, boys."

"Hussle!" Scobel drove the three to the farther side of the kitchen. "You fellers shore got a awful gall."

"I'll be damned!" swore Stutt. "Why, the sher'ff ain't come in yet. Huh! Mebbe Tex made it after all."

"I'm guessin' he made it all right," said Dakota grimly. "We'll find out. We'll corral these lads in a cell, Baldy, an' see can we find this Tex person. I got a good hunch he's in town."

"Was you all talking about me?" purred a voice in soft southern accents, and a

man's form bulked large in the kitchen door. "Ah wouldn't, young fellah!" was his cool warning to Dakota. "You nevah could bring that gun up in time."

An icy chill of depression mingled with some vaguely familiar picture as Dakota watched the tall man glide into the room. His long hands hung in seeming carelessness at his sides, yet they were close, far too close, to the black butts of two heavy six-guns. With his first glance Dakota fixed the man's status. That cool confidence, those unwavering jade-green eyes and pinched-in lips, the deceptive poker-mask of that long lean face: these were unmistakable marks of identification to Dakota. This Texan was a gunman of the most clever sort.

"It looks like you all got in a jam. Ah thought Ah tol' you to wait." The Texan was speaking to the three men against the wall, but his cold green eyes never left the smiling cowboy. "Kid," he addressed Dakota, "have Ah evah had the pleasure of meeting you befo'?"

"Mebbe not. Still mebbeso. I might place you by name."

"He claims he's that fancy gun-fightin' Dakoty," sneered Stutt. "But, hell! He can't be!"

"No?" drawled the Texan, a little of human light glinting in his green eyes. "You think not, Bull? Well, you are wrong. You are Dakota, suh," he stated positively.

"Plumb guilty," admitted the cowboy cheerfully. "I'm sure ashamed that I can't place you, Tex."

The Texan made no comment on that. Dakota immediately forced aside the puzzle of the man's identity to consider his chances of making a play. Said chances were mighty poor, he decided. Stutt and his two pards had recovered their guns, and had swung back to Scobel, which made it impossible for Dakota to move against the Texan without endangering the deputy. Then Dakota relaxed. No need to fret over this situation; there was nothing at stake.

"Come outa that cornah, Po'ky," ordered the Texan, "and take Dakota's hahdwaah."

Had his plight really been desperate, had there been even the possibility of danger to Scobel or himself, Dakota would have taken a chance. But he could see nothing serious in this, so he allowed the fat man to take the six-gun from his hand. His other weapon still lay under his coat, but Dakota, studying the grimly-efficient Texan, knew that he would have to be in a pretty tight hole before he tried to get it.

Partly relieved from the necessity for watchfulness now that the cowboy was disarmed, the Texan surveyed the room with a slow stare. Almost at once his gaze found the slicker roll that Stutt had kicked open. With the sinuous movements of a tiger he crossed to the scattered clothing, stirred it with his foot and caught up the vivid blanket coat—the coat that Dakota had found left behind by the dry-gulcher at the point.

"So!" That low-voiced exclamation sounded like the angry purr of the tiger that the Texan now resembled. "Is this yuhr coat, Mistah Dakota?"

There was suspicion in the man's tones and manner, and a tense something that suggested a geyser about to erupt. But in his own exultation Dakota noticed only that the Texan had recognized that red coat and floppy hat!

"Not mine," replied Dakota. "Mebbe now it might be yours."

The Texan stabbed Dakota with his terrible eyes. Something told the cowboy that he was near to death just then.

"But you brought it heah. You admit that?"

"Sure. I found them duds—where somebody cached 'em."

"Yeah? Ah reckon maybe you did. Bull,"—to Dakota's surprise there was a breaking suggestion in the Texan's voice—"except fo' the pay Ah promised you fellahs, our job is done. You see, it looked so easy Ah decided to do it alone. But Ah didn't get up to that Devil's Claw soon enough. Ah found both the sheriff and the Kid—daid!"

The three men blinked and stared, Bull Stutt finally voicing their collective query.

"That stuff? Didya find that?"

"Not yet." The Texan's eyes flecked again to Dakota. "If Ah can be patient, Ah will find it fo' you. But it will be hard to wait. You see, boys, Ah got a glimpse of the dirty stinkah that killed the Kid. He was riding away—wearing this coat and hat. You Dakota! Ah's giving you a chance to squah yo'se'f. If you cain't prove that you weah heah in town—Ah will kill you—shoot you in the back just like you did mah brothah!"

CHAPTER IV

Grief—or Fear?

DAKOTA, backed against the wall, studying the flushed face of the Texan, reasoned through to a surprising suspicion. This crafty gunman had been that killer on the Devil's Claw. Sight of this distinctive clothing had inspired the Texan to make a trick play for the benefit of the three aids whom he had promised a rich reward; also, for an excuse to remove a dangerous witness. Yes, this Tex had brought these men as a blind, possibly planning all the time to make them the goats in this hellish affair. Of course! Instead of being a brother, Madden had been an enemy whom this Texan desired to remove. Verification of that theory came in a surprised outburst from Bull.

"Brother?" he spluttered. "Aw, Tex, you didn't tell us that. You said he was a pard you wanted to help out. An' you promised us—"

"So that's why yuh been hangin' aroun' town for a week, Tex!" snapped Baldy Scobel. "Purty slick, yuh was, at playin' ev'rybody."

Dakota was again trying to place the Texas gunman. He was sure now that he had never met the man before, but that striking personality suggested a fame that should have traveled far. A gunman from the South. Not Carrillo, the notorious Mexican killer, nor "Fast" Mail, the lightning gun artist of Oklahoma. Who else?—An impression that had touched Dakota vaguely at the very first sound of the Texan's voice now struck the cowboy with the heart-breaking force of a friend's blow.

Johnny Plane! Impossible! Yet the physical description of that colorful Texas gunman as pictured by Dakota since boyhood, the Southern speech, the perfect coolness, all fitted. Still impossible! The Johnny Plane that Dakota had well-nigh worshipped as a boy never could shoot from ambush. A romantic figure of the border, this Plane, a Robin Hood hero of the poor, who fought only on the side of the weak, a man who could summon an army to his aid for some mission of chivalry. No, a man who double-crossed his pals and killed from ambush could not be Johnny Plane.

"Ah'm waiting, Dakota," purred the Texan. "And it's only because Ah've heahd of you, and admiahed you, that Ah'm waiting. Ah accuse you of murdahing mah brothah. What do you say?"

"Jest a minnit, Johnny!" burst out Stutt. "That cache! If he's got that hid out we got to—"

"Johnny!" cut in the tense voice of Dakota. "So I was right, although I wouldn't let myself believe it! Johnny Plane! The kids' hero. A square, straight-shooter, who backs the play of any poor devil what gets in trouble, who always gives his man an even break, who robs tuh pay the old widow's mor'gage. Hell!" Spots of red flushed Dakota's cheeks, and his lips strained white against his teeth. "A pretty picture I've had of you, Plane. But I don't see that white ring aroun' your head, or airy wings sproutin'. Yuh're jest a low-down, dry-gulchin' skunk!"

For an instant the Texan's eyes lighted with a warming softness, and he moistened his thin lips with his tongue. Then, as if grasping the insult of that speech, he retreated behind the poker mask of icy calm.

"It was yuhr nerve that Ah always admiahed, Dakota. Ah see you still have it with you. But you are not denying that you killed mah brothah."

For once in his life rage threatened to drive Dakota to suicide. More positive than ever was he now that the Texan was using that accusation to hoodwink his three tools. Yes, that was it! For a mere

five thousand dollars this heralded knight of the poor had betrayed his pals, had shot down two men in cold blood, and would now remove a dangerous witness by killing Dakota!

"If yuh'll give me a gun," said Dakota, edging toward his coat-covered weapon, "I'll take a chance against the great Johnny Plane."

"Eef that ees Dakoty," suggested the little Mexican, "eet ees well yo' keel heem queek. He weel treek you."

"But that gold?" Bull Stutt saw his promised reward slipping away. "We wanta know what become of that."

Dakota, cool now with the desperate need for coolness, was seeking a way out of this dangerous predicament. Only vaguely did Stutt's speech filter into his brain. But it roused something, the hazy germ of an idea. Suddenly the cowboy relaxed, drawing a deep breath, smiling into the hard green eyes of the Texan.

"Yuh seem tuh have got me, Plane. Looks like I didn't get the breaks." Carefully he refrained from glancing at the three men who stood just beyond the Texan. He spoke in a significant way to the Texan, as if there was something between them. "We won't argue now over who killed McCarroll an' the feller you say's your brother. You an' me both know that dirty job was done tuh get what was in a certain white sack. Well, we'll say the killer got it"—Dakota paused, watching for sign of consternation in Plane's face—"an' he hid it."

The Texan's impassive countenance betrayed no hint of change, but Dakota caught a significant movement of the men beyond. If he could turn those three men on Plane. . . .

"So let's do some guessin' over where that sack is," went on Dakota, elated by the knowledge that he was winning his audacious bet with death. "Mebbe now yuh'll guess at a hole in a mess of slide rock. But yuh'll be wrong. I can guess lots closer than that."

Plane's eyes narrowed in puzzled questioning. Dakota was sure he understood the man's trouble. The Texan had grasped the cowboy's hint that the sack of loot had been moved. But Dakota had not dangled that rich bait for the benefit of Tex Plane.

"Johnny Plane!" Dakota's triumph showed only in his boyish smile. "I didn't kill that convict yuh call your brother —but I seen that dirty stunt—an' I know where that loot is hid. I'm huntin' that killer myself, an' your antics are right suspicious. So it's my turn now tuh ask a few. Yuh know what I mean, Plane?"

The Texan still stood at ease, no flicker of his jade-green eyes, no twitching of the long fingers hanging close beside his guns. Then his hands moved slowly outward and lifted to the level of his shoulders.

"You win, Dakota," he said, and there was no mistaking the admiration in his soft drawl. "Ah've heahd that you was smaht, and Ah will now so testify. But" —his level tones became the rage-lashed purr of a tiger as he looked at his three gunmen—"Ah know three hombres who may not live to spend theah five thousand dollahs."

"Aw, Tex," whined Porky, whose rather unsteady gun was pointing at Plane's back, "we can't let you bump this kid till he shows us—"

"Shut up, Porky!" snapped Bull Stutt, stepping forward to jab his gun into the Texan's ribs. "Johnny Plane's big name can't make a chicken outa me. I don't aim to be double-crossed by nobody. Tex, you promised us that stuff if we'd come help you git that feller loose—an' now you spring it that he was your brother— an' put on a big show for us. Yessir, all the time you had it figgered to dry-gulch them lads, an' grab Madden's hard money, an' leave us to hold the sack. I don't know where this Dakoty comes in, but he says he knows where that swag is at. Slip up here, fellers. We'll take the two of 'em an' go collect our pay."

Porky waddled forward, lifted Plane's guns from their holsters and tucked them under his arm. Sonora advanced with gliding steps to Dakota's side. Stutt turned to Baldy Scobel, who still stood back of the stove.

"Where's your keys?" he demanded.

"We'll jest lock you in one of your fancy rooms."

Scobel looked plaintively at Dakota, but the cowboy had attention only for the Texan.

"Keys are under that coat," muttered the deputy, jerking his head at a nail on the wall.

At Stutt's order Sonora went to fetch the horses, which had been left at a hitch-rail up the street. Bull Stutt edged over to secure the ring of keys from the nail under the coat. Porky, still with Plane's six-guns under his arm, was working round to get Dakota and the Texan in line, and thus make easier his job of watching them.

Dakota was rather disgusted not to have foreseen this outcome. Still, he didn't see what else he could have done to remove the menace of the deadly Texan. And now he was facing a greater danger. These three outlaws would take him to Devil's Claw, and demand that he turn over the convict's loot. Whether he complied or not, Bull Stutt would be quite apt to play safe, and the Devil's Claw would witness another tragedy.

So Dakota was ready to clutch at any straw. He considered trying for his gun under the coat, but found Porky a barrier there. Scobel still stood beyond the stove. No hope of aid from him. Stutt was reaching for the coat that hung over the ring of keys. Porky, with his back to Stutt, was edging past Dakota to keep Plane in his line of vision.

The cowboy looked speculatively at Tex Plane. The Texan was leaning against the wall, watching the proceedings with cold unconcern. As if disturbed by Dakota's glance, Plane slowly turned his face. Smiling eyes met greenish slits in a long stare. Then the Texan shrugged his trim shoulders.

"It looks like this is one hole you cain't crawl out of, Dakota. Ah feel right bad, too, 'cause if you go with them cut-throats you and me, nevah will know which is the fastest on the draw. Po'ky!" He addressed the fat man sharply, but continued to eye Dakota. "You are going to drop one of mah guns and—"

If the Texan finished that speech no one heard it. Porky, possibly feeling the slipping hint of Plane's fear that he would drop the guns from under his arm, reached for them with the hand that held his own weapon. That was the cue for the tensely waiting cowboy. Dakota hurled himself forward, the Texan's guns his objective. His lunging shoulder battered Porky in the stomach, while his hands caught the guns by the barrels.

At the sound of movement Stutt whirled, coat in one hand, key ring in the other. Instinctively he dropped both those impediments to drag out his gun. As Dakota sprawled on top of Porky, he felt the warm breath of a bullet past his cheek. During the brief instant of falling Dakota had secured both guns by the barrels. He managed to reverse the one in his left hand, but the other was slipping. As he flung a snap shot at Stutt, he hurled the second weapon across the floor to the advancing Texan.

Dakota's shot had missed, and before he could fire again Baldy Scobel had flung himself upon Stutt's back, catching the outlaw's gun arm. Reluctant to chance-hit the deputy, Dakota flashed his gun round to Porky, who was struggling up. But the fat man had sensed disaster and had already decided to leave the dangers of that room. Dakota had a glimpse of a fat bulk slithering hog-like through the door.

"A nice bit of teamwork, Dakota," drawled Tex Plane, balancing in his hand the six-gun he had snatched up. "Mistah Bal' Haid, if you will kindly jerk to one side."

The giant Stutt was possessed of more than the usual run of courage, but the thought of facing Johnny Plane on less than even terms apparently did not appeal to him. With movements surprisingly speedy for so large a man, he wrenched loose from Scobel and dived out of the room through the window at his side.

"Hey, why didn't one of you fellers git him?" bawled Scobel. "Yuh could 'a'—B'gosh, you rannies shore worked together that time. 'Lookout, Po'ky,' says Tex, 'yuh'll drop them guns.' An' Piggy

looks out—an' Dakoty pops in. Heh-heh-heh! That was the best—"

The deputy's chuckling voice trailed off as his blinking gaze took in the scene across the room. Dakota stood near the inner door facing Plane, who was now backed against the opposite wall. The Texan's gun dangled in his right hand. The cowboy stood in much the same position except that his left hand held his weapon. Both men were poised, waiting, each tensely watching the other.

"Ah'm waiting, Mistah Dakota. No man can evah say that Johnny Plane would kill from a hide-out—and not answer to me. Ah you ready to crawl—or fight?"

"No need tuh play-act with me, Tex," flared Dakota, hot with returning anger. "Lissen tuh me now, old-timer. We both know what happens when two fairly good men come together like this. Both dies. That suits me—if you are the dirty devil I seen wearin' this." He gestured with his right hand to the hat and coat.

"You ah getting right mad," purred the Texan. "But you are tricky. You may be trying to put onto me what you done yo'se'f. Making of you a rotten stinkah."

Dakota was conscious of a sick feeling in his stomach. Did the Texan sincerely believe that Dakota had been that blanket-coated rifleman? Or was he himself that fiend, seeking to remove a dangerous witness? That latter did not seem reasonable in view of Plane's distracting aid, and his failure to drop the cowboy when he had the opportunity. Besides, true to his square-dealing reputation as it had come glamorously to Dakota, Tex Plane was now waiting for his antagonist to make the first move, well knowing that no matter how speedy his own shot would be, he too was doomed. Again there surged through Dakota the hero-worshipping thrills of boyhood. Again he listened, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, to campfire yarns of Johnny Plane, lone wolf bandit and fighting Samaritan.

"Tex!" said the cowboy softly. "I'm ready tuh crawl. I've got a hunch that you an' me oughta talk straight before we run off hog-wild. It would be a sad joke on us, if after we was dead it turned out that neither one of us done that killin'."

"Ah was about to suggest that, Dakota." The Texan raised his left hand in a gesture of peace while he thrust his gun into its holster. "Ah'm remembahing now what-all Ah have heahd about Dakota. So Ah expect to do some backing down mah-se'f. Now we—It looks like that shooting woke up this sleepy town." He tilted his head to listen to running footsteps outside.

"WHAT'S all this?" asked a man springing through the rear door. "Huh! I thought I'd find a pile of dead men!"

Dakota turned from Plane to inspect an oldish man wearing a white collar and a long black coat, a garb that matched perfectly the forceful features of steel-trap mouth and deep-set, probing eyes.

"What happened, Scobel?" the newcomer asked the deputy. "What was that shooting? I was afraid somebody was trying to get Mac's prisoner."

"Aw, Joe!" spluttered Scobel. "It's a tangle worse'n when a drunk sheepherder hires out tuh punch cows. I don't know what'n'ell it was about. A bunch of waddies went plumb bugs. An' that's one of 'em." He jerked his head at the Texan.

"Evening, Mistah Callas," greeted Plane.

"Yuh know him, Joe?" Baldy Scobel scowled his surprise. "Why he's herdin' with a gang that needs hangin'."

"Don't blame me for that," retorted the impressive, black-coated man. "I don't inquire into the pedigree of men I sell horses to. But let's get this straight. Tex, what about it?"

"If you don't mind," drawled the Texan pleasantly, "Ah will let Mistah Dakota explain. Ah believe he saw mo' of the affaah than Ah did."

"You seen enough of it for me!" snapped Scobel. "I'm shore hangin' onto you, Tex."

"So?" The Texan almost chuckled. "If you feel thataway Ah cain't stay to heah Mistah Dakota's talk. Fo' mah time is too valuable now to spend it in yuhr lockup." He backed toward the door.

"No, yuh don't!" howled the deputy. "Dakoty, throw that gun on him."

"Why, I'm ashamed of you, Baldy," grinned Dakota. "Tex jest saved you from havin' tuh sleep in a cell. I bet old Mac wouldn't 'a' locked up a man who'd helped him thataway. Your gun, Tex," he said softly, extending the weapon. "Much obliged for the loan of it."

"The fust time anothah man evah fiahed that gun. But Ah am right proud that it was Dakota. Ah will say good evening, gentlemen. See you latah, Dakota." The Texan touched the brim of his big gray hat and walked coolly out.

"Let him go." The man in the black coat peered from under bushy brows at Scobel. "Now, let's get this. Where's Mac? Who's this man?"

"Ev'rybody calls him Dakoty," replied the deputy. "This is Mister Joe Callas, Dakoty. Our next senator, an' a big rancher we're right proud of. Joe was a good friend of Mac's," he added brokenly.

"Was?" Callas shook hands with Dakota. "What you mean by that? Where is Mac?"

"I'll tell it," said Dakota. "I was goin' tuh hunt yuh up, Mister Callas, but things got tuh poppin' here. Mac is dead."

"Dead?" The rancher's face sagged as if stricken with paralysis. In his dilated eyes horror struggled with the plaintive bewilderment of a child. "You—you don't mean—dead?"

Dakota nodded grimly. "Bushwacked. Both him an' that Madden convict got it."

The reaction of the rancher to this tragic news was so startling that Dakota hesitated to make further explanation. Callas slid into a chair, feebly brushing his white lips with the back of his hand. The deep-set gray eyes that had been so brightly keen at his entrance were now glassy with a trance-like stare.

"Mac—dead!" he moaned. "Just when —h-h-how—wh-where did it happen?"

"Up at that Devil's Claw," replied Dakota, surprised that grief could so upset this strong man. "It looks like somebody got onto what Mac was up there for, an' laid for him. Shot 'em both down like chickens."

"But did they—" Callas clenched his hands, closed his eyes, bit hard on his lower lip. "How do you know about it?" he demanded, gaining a measure of control.

"I seen it—from up on the hill—half a mile away."

"Did—did you go down to see if. . . ." The rancher's choking whisper trailed off.

"I went down. It wasn't till then that I found out who it was. Old Dan McCarroll was a friend of mine."

"A friend?" Callas' eyes lighted in the hopeful manner of a prisoner who sees the barred door swinging open. "That—that is fine! Then maybe—Dakota, Mac was my friend, too, the best friend I ever had. Why, just last night—we planned something—that proved it. But had Mac —Did you see—what they were after?" That anxious query was that of a very sick man asking his doctor for the verdict. "Had they found—that sack?"

Dakota had intended to keep to himself his removal of that sack to a fresh hiding place. But he had already revealed that fact to Plane and the outlaw trio. And it would seem that he could find no stronger aid in running down the murderer of Dan McCarroll than this influential rancher. Still, Dakota hesitated, troubled over Callas' near collapse. It struck him suddenly that Callas had shown nothing of a man's normal desire to learn the identity of a friend's murderer.

"We'll talk about that after awhile," said Dakota. "If yuh'll take a brace, Mister Callas, how about gettin' hold of the coroner?"

Callas found it hard, but finally he managed to voice an order to Scobel.

"Go call Beeber, will you, Baldy? And maybe you better have somebody hunt up Dort Dorsey."

Doc Beeber, the coroner, a nervous, quick-stepping little man, returned with Scobel to the office in the front of the jail, and Dakota gave directions as to the location of the bodies. The coroner hastened out to get a buckboard and a jury. Callas paced up and down the narrow passage that gave entrance to four steel-fronted cells.

A crowd began to gather, drawn by the news that Coroner Beeber had let out at the livery stable. A husky puncher with a broken nose and ears that resembled toadstools, edged into the office and waited until Callas appeared on his pacing round.

"What's it all about, Joe?" the man with the battered features asked Callas. "Doc says the sheriff got killed."

"Yes." The rancher brightened a little at sight of the puncher. "Mac's dead. Where's Buzz?"

"Over to the Novelty. You want him?"

"I want you two to stick around." It was plain that Callas was speaking to an employee. "As soon as that district attorney shows up and we get lined out, Baldy will be getting a posse together."

As the broken-nosed man went out Scobel whispered to Dakota: "That's Champ Gillman, the feller Joe an' Mac didn't agree about. He usta be a prize fighter, so he says. Foreman now for Callas, an' has worked that Buzz Brewster in as hoss boss. I sure don't want them two in our posse."

"Dort must be playing poker somewhere," muttered Callas impatiently. "Dakota, I've got to talk with you. Didn't you say you saw that killer?"

"I saw him," replied Dakota, ready now to investigate a startling suspicion. "I got the disguise he wore. Take a look at it." He fetched in the brim-puckered old hat and the red blanket coat. "Ever see 'em before?"

With his brows cut by a frown that betrayed only curiosity, Callas examined the clothing.

"I couldn't say. I've seen hats strung like this with a thong and the country's full of mackinaws made out of Indian blankets. But about—about that gold? Had Mac found it?"

"Yes, I saw them get it out. Then, after the killer had got in his dirty work, I seen him hide it. But that sack ain't where he hid it," the cowboy added.

Dakota could not fail to see the returning surge of energy as it fairly poured into the body of the rancher. Color flowed into his cheeks and his eyes brightened almost to their habitual keenness.

"You got it?" Without waiting for a reply Callas swung to a chair and sat down. "Dakota, I'm rather interested in that sack of gold. You see, I was agent for the express company when it was stolen. I helped to catch that Madden, but we never were able to induce him to tell where he hid his loot, although we knew that he must have cached it within a hundred yards of that Devil's Claw point where he held up the stage. I've always felt a little responsible—the express company had to make good that five thousand to Sam Gowan, the saloon man who was shipping it to the bank." Callas paused to draw a deep breath. "Would you know that killer if you saw him again?"

"I'm afraid not. I got a long look at him—several of 'em. He was a mark tuh remember in that hat an' coat, but he ditched them. That's all the clue I got, as all this country rides Morgans."

"Yes, I've sold hundreds of them around here. But"—the rancher's mind seemed full of that sack of loot—"it was lucky you were there, Dakota. If that killer had got that sack— You brought it in?"

"Nope, I hid it up there."

"That's good. I'll go with you to get it in the morning."

Callas became almost his keen normal self as he settled then to a general discussion of the affair. The rancher had sold Tex Plane four Morgans the week before. He had seen nothing of Plane's gunman aids, but his horse man, Brewster, had mentioned that strangers were camping in a Callas line shack some two miles from town. After Dakota had told of the exciting mix-up resulting from the mistake of those three, Callas promptly made suggestion along the line of the cowboy's first theory, that the Texan had brought those gunmen in as a blind for his own devilish work.

Dakota was moved to make impulsive defense of Tex Plane, but decided against it. Callas remarked impatiently that he guessed the district attorney wasn't going to show up, and prepared to leave.

"Yuh say yuh want tuh go with me tuh get that sack?" asked Dakota.

"Oh, yes, I'd forgotten that. We'll go early in the morning. I'll take my buggy. I want you to see my harness grays. The sweetest driving team in Wyoming."

After the rancher had gone, Dakota returned to the kitchen and ate a belated supper with Scobel. At ten o'clock the coroner and his party came in with the bodies, and a cell received the gruesome result of the tragedy. Scobel offered to fix Dakota a good bed in a cell, or let his guest have the cot in the kitchen.

"Nope, I'll hit the hotel when I get ready for bed," said the cowboy. "I got a little scouting aroun' tuh do first. See yuh in the mornin'." With a jaunty swagger that concealed all of grief, as well as all of grim determination, Dakota strolled out to the street.

CHAPTER V

Free Drinks

FOLLOWING the habit of watchfulness that had often saved his life, Dakota halted at the edge of the plank sidewalk for an apparently careless survey of the street. A number of oil lamps and lanterns in frames that had once held glass lighted the fronts of the Novelty Saloon and the Cowmen's Hotel opposite. Faintly there drifted to Dakota the jingle of a piano and the squeaky voice of a woman singing. He could see no one upon the street.

Yet he was alert as he strolled down toward the hotel. He had it in mind to hunt up Tex Plane for a heart-to-heart talk, but in the meantime he was not forgetting the Texan's late aids. While those three outlaw gunmen were desperately anxious to get that loot, they were of the sort to forego profit until a score of hate had been settled. Convinced now that Dakota was a dangerous enemy, they would lay for him at the first opportunity. Still, the cowboy reasoned that Plane's treacherous aids would keep off the street; they would not hanker for an open meeting with the Texan, who had expressed himself as being quite peeved over their antics in the jail.

The cowboy slowed as he approached the express office, scanning the dark hole of the stone doorway and satisfying himself that it held no lurking human form. He looked then to the right, at the street obstruction of the big scales guarded by the two iron posts and heavy pole bar.

"Heluva thing tuh have out in a street," he sniffed. "I betcha many a poor waddy has busted himself on that of a dark night. It's a wonder the boys don't yank it—"

The sixth sense that enables a boxer to anticipate his opponent's blow, drove Dakota plunging into the black doorway of the express office. He was conscious of a lightning flash across the street, the vicious blare of a gun, the jangle of breaking glass beside his head. Several more shots streaked their red lines of flame across the street before Dakota could flatten himself behind the stone jamb and give attention to the source of those flashes. They were coming from the inky blackness of an alley between a store and Sam Gowan's Novelty. Promptly Dakota's guns went into action. At his third shot the firing opposite ceased, and the cowboy could hear stumbling footsteps in retreat.

Dakota took no credit for the route of his assailants. They had been moved to flight by the racket of saloon patrons rushing to the door. Before the men inside the Novelty had reached the street, Dakota had dived into a narrow passage along the side of the saloon opposite the alley down which he could still hear the bushwackers making their getaway.

The cowboy's hasty move had been prompted by the hope that if he could get down that right side of the saloon he might intercept the ambushing party, which he was sure would be Bull Stutt and his mates. Excited men were now pouring into the street, shouting inquiries. The running footsteps inside the building on Dakota's left merged into a cursing mix-up as the swinging door exit became blocked by the curious crowd. Dakota started groping down the wall of the saloon, impatient to reach the rear and head off the men retreating down the other side.

To his disgust Dakota found his progress blocked by a blank wall. Sensing,

then, the purpose of this passage, he made feeling search and found a door, a side entrance to the saloon. Just at that moment he heard somewhere in the rear the squeaking protest of a rusty hinge. Somebody was slipping into the Novelty through a rear entrance. Softly Dakota opened the door beside him and stepped into a gloomy hall.

He found himself facing the end of a saloon bar that extended out of his sight toward the front. The cowboy tiptoed down the passage toward the saloon: if a man were slipping in from the back Dakota wanted much to get a look at him. Stealthy footsteps creaked the floor, then two men crossed Dakota's line of vision, one of them halting at the end of the bar.

"Here's where we git a free drink, Buzz," said the man who had passed out of Dakota's sight. "I'm sure needin' one."

Bottle and glasses that the hurrying-out bartender and patrons had abandoned were brought tinkling into use. The smallish man at the end of the bar poured a drink with steady hand and lifted it to a face that looked to Dakota like the profile of a hawk.

"Ugh!" shuddered Hawk Face. "Carbolic acid would be weak tea 'side of Sam's pizen. Guess we better mosey, Champ, 'fore Sam comes back an' makes us pay for these drinks. Next week," he chortled, "we'll mebbe buy this place. Com'on, let's slip outa this side door."

Under other circumstances Dakota might have allowed that by getting out ahead. But his suspicion that these two, whom he knew to be the Callas bosses, had been the men firing at him from the alley, decided him against retreat. It looked to him as if this attack might have some connection with that killing at Devil's Claw. He clumped coolly into the saloon.

"Where's everybody?" inquired Dakota innocently.

The two at the bar swung round, Champ Gillman, he of the broken nose and cauliflower ears, betraying wild-eyed consternation. His undersized mate appeared as cool as if he were being greeted by an acquaintance.

"Oh, hello, cowboy," returned Hawk Face. "Guess they went out to see what's the excitement. We seen a chance to git a extry drink. Have one, stranger." He reached for the bottle.

"I jest et," was Dakota's excuse for passing up the doubtful liquor. "You boys don't seem right curious about that shootin'."

"Neither do you," sneered Champ Gillman, the Callas foreman. "Say, Buzz, this is that Dakoty we been hearin' about."

"Yeah," admitted Dakota. "An' you two are the lads that help this big rancher spend his money. So we're all acquainted now."

"That damn' Scobel's been shootin' off about us!" growled Gillman. "Some day I'll—"

"Aw, Baldy's all right," interrupted Buzz Brewster. "He's jest got the habit of cussin' everybody that his sheriff boss didn't like. So you're Dakoty," he purred, puffy lids drooping over eyes that were like cracks round a stove door. "I've heerd a lot about you. They say you're double-distilled hell with a gun."

"Do they?" drawled Dakota, estimating this Brewster as the brains of this pair, and a far more dangerous man than his pugilistic mate. "Folks must be guessin'. I ain't so awful good. Still, I'd be right disgusted to miss a man walkin' in the open only jest across the street."

"What you mean by that?" howled Gillman. "If you're sayin'—"

"Easy, Champ," soothed Brewster. "Was it you that was bein' shot at, Dakoty?" he queried gently.

"Yeah, but I'm thinkin' that was a mistake. Then shooters must 'a' mistook me for somebody else—or mebbe they heard some talk to-night, an' got the idee I recognized the feller that killed McCarroll."

"An' you didn't?" asked Brewster, slouching against the bar, a careless pose that did not deceive Dakota.

"Nope, jest got a far-away look at him. But if that was him shootin' at me he was plumb foolish. I'm that lad's golden goose. But mebbe he hadn't heard that I found his sack of loot."

Dakota's hope of learning something from the pair's reaction to that information was ruined by the noisy return of a group of men. These were too busy discussing that shooting to observe that the three at the bar had not recently preceded them inside. The bartender resumed his place and slid out glasses. Champ Gillman and Buzz Brewster strangely passed up an invitation to drink on the house, and hastily left the saloon.

"Now I've jest raised the dickens!" mused Dakota, after he had side-stepped the free drink and had gained the street. "Or have I pulled a nice stroke of business? Mebbe so. Huh! Let's say one of them Callas bosses is that killer. He hears enough to guess that I got a line on him. So him an' his pal goes out tuh give me the quiet. But now they know I'm wise about that sack, an' that I mebbe got it hid out. Doggone! It ain't right reasonable—this killin' men wholesale for five thousand dollars. Well, let's see can we find Tex."

After loitering on the street for half an hour, and seeing nothing of the Texan, Dakota decided for bed. It was well after midnight, yet he was not particularly sleepy. On his way across the street to the hotel he halted abruptly, pondered until this thoughts produced a grin, then headed for the jail stable.

"This'll be lots better," he told himself as he threw his saddle on White Foot. "It might be dangerous for me an' Joe Callas tuh go after that sack in daylight. So I'll jest mosey out an' get it now."

CHAPTER VI

Under the Devil's Claw

THE moon had risen by the time Dakota rode under the sinister fingers of Devil's Claw. The night air was nippy with frost, but dark clouds scudding across the moon gave warning of storm. Dakota urged White Foot down the old cow trail and across to the glade, where he dismounted and stamped his cold feet.

"Doggone!" The cowboy peered into the gloomy shadows. "This is a spooky hole. Feels like that devil an' all his imps was clawin' at me. I'm sure glad it's comin' daylight."

Dakota stumbled along the cliff wall to the hackberry bush behind which he had hidden the canvas sack. He straightened from his groping search, shivering with the creepy feeling that he was being watched, and looked uneasily about. He discovered at once that in the murky morning light he could readily people every rock and tree with a human form.

"Mebbe I got reason tuh be jumpy," he murmured, and found the sack. "With such a bunch after this stuff it's right likely some of 'em is smart enough tuh figger that I'd come after it. Now there's them three gazabos that Tex brought in. An' the two sour pickles that tried tuh bushwack me last night. With that Callas rancher actin' awful queer about this money. An' not forgettin' that Tex may be some interested himself. Doggone! Them sore arms of mine sure don't like this cold."

The cowboy secured the sack back of his cantle, paused in the act of mounting to look up at the knobby point hanging black against the brightening sky. A creepy chill shot down his spine at sight of what looked to be a kneeling man.

"Aw, shoot!" he sniffed, and swung into the saddle. "Only a rock."

He crossed the creek and drove White Foot up the crumbling coulee wall. Again he peered up at the menacing ambush point, convinced himself that the rock-man had not moved, and brought his gaze down just as he rounded a clump of brush at the roadside.

In the road not twenty feet from Dakota a rider was sitting his horse. There was no mistaking that lank form, that undented gray hat, that long, expressionless face.

"Mornin', Tex," greeted Dakota pleasantly. "Been waitin' long for me?"

"Quite some time. Did you get what you come aftah, Dakota?"

"What was that?" Dakota glanced instinctively at the finger-tip point above and blinked when his saw his rock figure move.

"Ah see you have it." Plane nodded

to the whitish lump back of Dakota. "May Ah ask what you aim to do with that?"

"I ain't got that quite figgered yet," drawled the cowboy, his mind wholly upon the danger from above. "I wonder are yuh still hankerin' tuh be generous, Tex, an' wantin' tuh turn it over to them three skunks?"

"Ah give them mah word," replied Plane. "Ah said they could have this loot if they'd come he'p me."

Dakota had heard that Johnny Plane's word was as good as gold twenties. In view of that, combined with Dakota's knowledge that a man was again lurking on that Devil's Claw, the cowboy jumped to the conclusion that Plane had for the time forgiven the outlaw trio, and had led them here to secure for them the promised reward. Without taking the time to reason logically on that, Dakota moved.

"Stop it, dang' yuh!" The cowboy caught up the reins of his side-stepping horse. "Where yuh goin'?"

Dakota's tickling spur was the cause of White Foot's dancing across the road toward the Texan. While that action was quite natural for a nervous horse, Dakota knew that it might look suspicious to Plane. If so, the Texan might mistake the cowboy's purpose in getting closer, or he might guess the actual reason for it. In either case Tex Plane would be quite apt to end Dakota's move with blazing guns. But Dakota, knowing of that skulking menace on the point, was desperate enough to take any chance.

"If that hop-scotching is a trick," remarked Plane, "you are wasting it. Ah'm not on the wah path."

"It was a trick all right." Dakota was now quieting White Foot, whose left side was jammed against the right side of the Texan's mount. "But it's jest a little life insurance I'm takin' against that rifle-pluggin' pard of your'n up above."

"So that's it." Plane did not look upward. "Ah thought Ah heahd something up theah a spell back. But if you think Ah'm a good protection, you are right bad fooled."

Dakota had not reasoned good sense out of that speech when he glimpsed a flash of fire against the rocks and heard a dull spat close beside him. Plane's horse reared, started to run, then crashed down like a heart-shot deer. The Texan sprang free just as a second bullet zipped past Dakota's ear.

The cowboy was already on the move. It was nearly a hundred yards across a short-brush opening to the base of the point, but Dakota saw those overhanging rocks as his only cover against the rifleman above. Before the third shot came he was lifting White Foot at a wild gallop across the open.

He was conscious of Plane speeding on foot some distance on his right. The Texan, too, was running the gauntlet of rifle bullets to reach the shelter of that overhang. The sharp spatting of the rifle continued, but to Dakota's surprise the shots were now all directed at Plane. At once Dakota swerved aside, intent on giving the Texan a lift, convinced that the rifleman was a mutual enemy.

But before Dakota could reach the running man, he saw the Texan stumble, then lurch headlong to the ground. Dakota halted beside the fallen man and peered down. Plane did not move. Dakota lifted his reins, urged White Foot on. No need to pull a hero stunt to save a dead man.

The rifleman had just transferred his lead-hurling attention to Dakota when the cowboy tore under the craggy cliff. He soothed the excited horse, looked sadly back at the figure in the open. Plane still lay as he had fallen, arms flung out as if to break his fall, head partly buried in a bush clump.

Dakota rolled a cigarette, lighted it and pinched out the match flame. Forgotten was his own danger in a throat-burning pang of emotion as again a boy's imagination pictured the heroic deeds of Johnny Plane. Dakota winced; how could he have suspected—

A shouted query from above drew Dakota from his sad musing. A voice bellowed in reply from down the road.

"Another one," muttered the cowboy. "So it must be them two Callas bosses

after all. Yeh, one of 'em up top—the other waited tuh grab me in the road if his pard foozeld. But why-for was Tex here? Doggone! Mebbe he got onto something an' come tuh give me a hand."

Suddenly the rifle began crashing again. Dakota thinking that the lookout had gained sight of himself, urged White Foot closer to the rock wall and looked upward. Finding that he could not be seen from above, he glanced quickly to the figure in the open.

Plane was moving. He had gained his knees and was crawling aimlessly, his head dropped nearly to the ground. A bullet threw sand in his face, but the Texan appeared not to notice.

To Dakota a wounded man, friend or enemy, was a subject for sympathy and aid. White Foot was half way to the crawling man before the cowboy realized that Tex Plane was a man he would go through hell to save. Dakota was conscious of hoofbeats pounding the road on his right. The rifle was still booming, its bullets puffing the dust about the Texan, but Plane crawled on unhit.

White Foot plowed to a halt beside the creeping man. Dakota flung himself off, caught Plane under the shoulders, raised the limp form against the horse.

"Wake up an' grab!" Dakota gave the Texan an ungentle shake. "Up yuh go!"

But Plane continued to roll his head from side to side. Dakota groaned and thrust aside his reluctance to straining his wounded arms. He lifted Plane, adjusted the jack-knifing body across the saddle, and leaped up behind.

Not until White Foot was racing back toward the point did Dakota realize that the rifle fire had ceased. The sharpshooter had emptied his weapon at a very fortunate moment for the success of this rescue act. Before the rifle could be reloaded, Dakota had reached the rock wall and was easing Plane down.

"This is good as any." Dakota pressed the Texan down back of a fuzzy bush. "Yuh 'wake now? Where yuh hit?"

Plane sat up, blinked at his rescuer and began feeling cautiously about his middle region. Then he rubbed his head and looked at the blood showing on his hand.

"Always when Ah don't know fo' sure," he drawled, "Ah have a feah it was in the stomach. Again Ah'm lucky. Ah must have jest stubbed mah toe and busted mah haid."

"It does look that way," chuckled Dakota, after his feeling fingers had located an egg-sized bump on Plane's forehead. "But I'm sure tickled yuh didn't get it in the middle. Well, here's the layout, Tex. They's a feller up top with a rifle. The other one's down the road somewhere."

"Lizahds!" sneered the Texan. "Ah was a fool to pick up scum like that. Ah wish now—"

"Huh?" Dakota thought the man must still be dazed. "Yuh thinkin' that's your three scalawags? It ain't. It's them two Callas bosses. They tried tuh pop me over last night."

"So that was the battle Ah heahd. Ah had a hunch Ah should go back. But Ah was headed out heah, thinking to meet you, Dakota, and have a little talk. But you are mistaken about this outfit. Ah happen to be right well acquainted with that rifle, and Ah would recognize its gentle voice anywheah. It's mine. Ah let them three lizahds take it to theah camp back in the hills."

From down the road a human fog-horn bellowed an inquiry to the rifleman on the point. It was unmistakably the high-pitched, whining tones of Porky that replied.

"Lookout, Bull! I nipped that damn' Tex, but both of 'em's down under me, sneakin'—"

"Theah you are," drawled the Texan, and hunched his back against the rock wall. "Well, Ah reckon this cleahs mah conscience complete. Ah don't owe them lizahds anything now."

The clatter of rocks rolling down the coulee bank across the road drew Dakota to his knees for a cautious survey. He sighted a moving something that might be the hat of a man edging along under the bank. He fired at the dark spot, which promptly disappeared.

"So you are Dakota," murmured the

Texan. "Ah have heahd of you—the whang of yuhr guns has traveled even down to Texas. Ah wondah if you would shake mah hand, Dakota?"

The cowboy impulsively thrust out his hand, drew it slowly back. "After I've squared myself—for thinkin' that Johnny Plane could ever pull a dirty trick. I've heard of you, too, Tex—I sorta patterned after you when I was a kid. But I was worked up last night. That sheriff—well, I owed him a lot."

"Ah understand. And Ah have some such excuse fo' losing mah haid and jumping you. That po' devil that was with the sheriff was mah brothah."

"We forget last night then." Dakota gripped the Texan's hand. "We ride on from here—together?"

"Ah would be right proud to ride through the hot place with Dakota. But them three lizahds! Ah done a fool picking on them, and it turned out Ah didn't need he'p a-tall. Ah figgered that sheriff would take a passle of deputies. You see, the Kid got me word some time ago about this trip to return that stolen money. That's why he said he'd come, because he was depending on me to get him loose. Ah picked up them lizahds and come up heah. But when Ah looked aroun' Ah seen Ah wouldn't need them. But Ah would have paid."

A six-gun blared from the brush fringe of the coulee bank, its bullet chipping the rock wall of the point far above. Dakota's answering shot hurled a shower of sand into the coulee.

"It looks like we are safe enough," remarked Plane, "if that fat Po'ky don't get around with his rifle. We can keep Bull and Sonora down back of that bank. Ah feel awful bad about that killing, Dakota. Not on account of mah brothah. Ah guess he was pretty bad. He got run out of Texas fo' stealing hosses. He was mah kin though, so Ah had to come. But that sheriff. He was a good man."

"A prince!" exclaimed the cowboy, then continued in choking tones: "Always on the square, Dan McCarroll was. Yeah, I'd 'a' been in the fix your brother was if it hadn't been for Mac. I got in with a bad bunch when I was a kid—quite some years ago. This McCarroll an' a posse run us down. I got shot bad, an' Mac found me crawlin' in the brush. He—he tied up my busted hip an' lifted me careful across his saddle. Then he led that hawss all one night—an' bedded me down at his friend's ranch. He rode off casual then an' I never seen him again—till yesterday."

The Texan moistened his lips and nodded. "Maybe if somebody had done that to mah brothah—"

"McCarroll handed me a real lesson," sighed Dakota, "but I only took it serious at times. I've killed for wages—an' I've fought against the law, but—well, lots of times I've drawed up sharp—when I thought of that night—layin' across that saddle—with my face pillowed on a blanket that Mac had tied to the stirrup fender. An' when I recognized that saddle—an' found Mac dead—an' knowed that I never could pay my big debt to him —" The cowboy broke off with a choking cough.

"Ah think Ah understand that, Dakota," murmured Plane. "Most folks would say that getting this killah would squaah yuh'r debt, but Ah see how it wouldn't. Still, we must get that killah—togethah. Do you have any suspicion?"

"Yes, but it ain't clear yet. That Joe Callas acts awful queer. An' his two bosses tried tuh get me."

"Ah cain't think it of Callas," mused Plane. "He was thick with that sheriff. They was always hobnobbing togethah, so Ah heah. McCarroll was up at that ranchah's house the night he had the Kid in town. Ah 'most tried to get the Kid out that night."

"You, Dakoty!" bawled the cow-bellow of Bull Stutt from the shelter of the coulee bank. "Ready to give up?"

"Give up what?" countered Dakota.

"You know! Com'on now. Walk out here in the road."

"Can't do it," refused the cowboy. "They's a hornet's nest out there."

Evidently Stutt and Sonora retired for discussion. Dakota again rose cautiously to study the surroundings. As a battle-

field that stretch of open was quite discouraging. The brush was too scanty to screen a retreat, there were no rocks near behind which to make a stand, and full daylight had arrived. Dakota turned to look down the rock wall, to a sharp bend in the coulee beyond. The crash of Plane's gun caused Dakota to drop back beside the Texan, whose smoking weapon was covering the bank across the road.

"See 'em?" asked Dakota.

"Ah got a glimpse of something. Right in that open spot. If it wasn't fo' Po'ky's rifle we could rush 'em easy."

"Uh-huh." Dakota slowly flexed his stiff right arm. "Say, yuh give me a scrumptious idee, Tex. If they was tuh raise up tuh shoot could yuh keep 'em from doin' it?"

"Shuah, but they won't do much raising."

"Let's see can't I make 'em," chuckled Dakota, and whistled to White Foot.

The bay pony lifted his head from a grass patch and nickered, then approached with mincing steps. But the men back of the bank had heard the whistle and the horse's reply. A head rose into view, but ducked hastily at Plane's shot.

"Get him?" bantered Dakota, swinging into the saddle.

"Only throwed sand in his eyes. What you aiming to do?"

"Goin' tuh order my scouts out tuh take the enemy from behind," drawled Dakota. "Your army, General Tex, will lay right here an' keep them two jumpin' jacks from jumpin'."

Plane glanced keenly along the rock wall, frowned at the fifty feet of open beyond, and nodded his understanding of Dakota's daredevil plan.

"Ah'll see that these two keep quiet," he said. "But you'll maybe break yo'ah neck getting down that bank—if that rifle lets you get that fah."

"That's the little chance I have tuh take," returned the cowboy, reaching back to untie the canvas sack. "Seein' as some such little thing might happen I'm leavin' this bag of trouble with you."

Dakota dropped the sack beside the Texan, who had risen to his knees to get a better view of the bank in front. As the cowboy rode out along the wall he heard the heavy boom of Plane's gun behind him.

Three more shots the Texan fired while Dakota was reaching the edge of the open that extended to a bend in the coulee. There was no return from the two outlaws, who seemed reluctant to exposing themselves on the chance of getting a shot. Dakota had no thought for the enemy, however; he was too troubled over that drop into the coulee, the depth of which he had no means of determining. He struck out at a lope across the stretch of open that he knew was covered by the rifleman above.

Shouts from Bull Stutt had warned Porky, and the rifle spoke before Dakota had gone ten feet from the shelter of the point. He could hear the bullets spatting in the ground, but he paid little heed to them. Flying lead could not distract him from the worrying problem of descending into the creek bed.

Dakota swung White Foot to the left, striking the coulee bank at an angle and hoping to find a place down which he could slide. He saw only a sheer drop of twenty feet. He raced on down the coulee, a perfect running shot for the bombarding Porky. Bullets fanned the cowboy's cheeks, ripped through his puffed-out shirt, kicked up the dust ahead. Dakota was sure that the man had fired a hundred shots, and was beginning to wonder what sort of a miracle magazine that rifle carried, when the firing ceased abruptly.

At last a break in the bank loomed ahead. Knowing that Porky was now under the necessity of reloading, the cowboy slowed, allowing White Foot to take his time down the slide of the broken coulee wall. The route proved not to be so bad. The bay pony kept his feet, sliding and hopping, and easing himself down, finally to gain the level of a willow bottom.

For some time Dakota had heard no shots from Plane. Now the Texan shouted something, but a thrashing commotion ahead had taken the cowboy's at-

tention. From the sounds Dakota concluded that Stutt and the Mexican were taking protective measures against the rear attack by making a hasty move. Wondering why Porky had not resumed his target practice, Dakota glanced upward. The tip of the point hung bright in the morning sunlight. The fat sharpshooter had disappeared.

Dakota raced down the willow-tangled bottom, fearful that the two outlaws below would cut round to where they would get some shooting at the openly exposed Texan. He could still hear the racket of their progress through the brush, and Bull Stutt's unintelligible yells to Porky.

Suddenly a foreign sound came to Dakota, the rattle of wheels. At once the cowboy drew up his horse, realizing that the war was over. A rig approaching on the road had interrupted the attack of the outlaw trio, and the enemy was in full retreat. Far up the bare main ridge Dakota sighted Porky, now mounted, tearing toward the cover of pine thicket. The cowboy rode down the creek to the glade crossing, and climbed the coulee bank to the road.

CHAPTER VII

"Ah Surrendah"

A COVERED buggy, drawn by a perfectly matched team of dapple-grays, had just halted under the point. Only one man rode in the buggy, but there were half a dozen horsemen close in the rear. Dakota squinted at Joe Callas in the buggy, frowned at Champ Gillman and Buzz Brewster riding behind, then relaxed at recognition of the hump-backed old man who was spurring up on the dead sheriff's buckskin. This was Baldy Scobel, closely trailed by three puncher-deputies.

"Mornin', folks," greeted Dakota. "Gosh, Baldy, if yuh'd held off a minnit, we'd mebbe had some boarders for your jail."

"I seen their dust," spluttered Scobel. "Wasn't it them three that put on the show las' night?"

"What's the idea, Dakota?" broke in Joe Callas sharply. "I thought we fixed it that you were coming out here with me this morning. And I was ready 'fore daylight. Did you dig up that stuff?"

"Sure." Dakota nodded to Tex Plane who was limping up. "Me an' Tex was bringin'—"

"There's the other one, Baldy," interrupted Gillman. "Let's see now how you go about a job of arrestin'."

Dakota threw a puzzled glance at Gillman, and frowned at Scobel, who appeared quite uncomfortable.

"Sorry, Tex," mumbled the deputy. "But I got a hull pocketful of warrants, an' one of 'em is private for you. Ed, slip in there an' git his guns."

One of Scobel's badge-decorated companions moved forward with reluctant slowness. Dakota, eyeing Plane, could sympathize with the far-from-eager deputy. The Texan stood at careless ease, long fingers toying with a button of his shirt. But smouldering fire in those greenish eyes gave the lie to his pose of utter unconcern.

"Ah don't often hand ovah mah guns," remarked Plane, and turned slowly to the sneering Gillman. "Would you like a try at taking 'em, big fellah?"

"He's out on a limb!" snorted the ex-pugilist. "But don't you forget this grinnin' kid, Baldy."

"What's the charge?" questioned Dakota.

"That mix-up in the jail," replied Scobel, "an' a lot of s'picion general. Dorsey, the district attorney, rolled me outa bed before I'd got good asleep an' jest raised p'tic'lar hell. He said tuh jail ev'rybody connected."

"Meanin' me too?" murmured Dakota.

"Not to-day!" snapped the deputy. "Or yet to-morry, or Sunday. I tol' Dort that —an' teared up that warrant under his nose—an' 'most made him eat my star."

"That was a mistake," put in Joe Callas. "I fixed that up with Dorsey as soon as I seen him this morning. We need you, Dakota, to help clean up this mess."

"Much obliged for gettin' me out of it,"

said Dakota dryly, his attention now for Gillman, who was glaring angrily at the rancher. "How about Tex?"

"We'll have to take him in," replied Callas. "He brought a bad gang in here to rescue that convict. Dorsey wants to question him. I suppose you got that sack, Dakota?" The rancher tacked that on, as if just recalling an incidental matter.

Dakota nodded; the rancher's suspicious interest in that sack could not take his mind from this battle-promising situation. Spurred on by Callas, Scobel would attempt to arrest Tex Plane, a fighting job at any time, but much more serious now, for Dakota would have to line up on Plane's side.

"If you're scared to do that little job, Baldy," remarked Buzz Brewster, "jest say the word. Me an' Champ'll take yore killer into town."

"You are right welcome to try," retorted Plane. "Ah've been sizing you, little fellah. Ah heah you work fo' Mistah Callas. Ah wondah does he know your history. A fellah tol' me he used to know you down in Arizona. He said that fo' a while you dropped that Brewstah name—and used a numbah—with your post-office at the Florence jail."

"That's a lie!" purred Brewster, only the slow drooping of his puffy eyelids betraying his anger. "I never was in Arizona."

"You calling me a liah?" Tex Plane was again the tiger. "Will you take it a-straddle, suh, or hop down?"

"Here!" howled Scobel, driving his horse in front of the Texan. "No private war jest now. An' I kin do my own arrestin', Buzz. Tex, stick your hands up."

Dakota swung his horse aside to intercept the advancing deputy. It would be hard to turn against Baldy Scobel, but he must throw in with the man whose interests lined with his own. Then his eyes met those of the Texan, held there for an instant, widened with surprise.

"Ah surrendah," said Plane coolly. "But Ah have reasons outhah than feah of a passle of dirty stinkahs. Will it be all right, Mistah Deputy, if Ah hand mah guns up to Dakota?"

Champ Gillman blustered a protest, but Scobel was making eager consent. Dakota accepted Plane's weapons and hooked the belts over his saddle horn. His surprise over the Texan's action had dissolved into full understanding. Tex Plane was surrendering to keep Dakota from battling against the law.

"Ah seem to be getting in a bad habit," remarked Plane dryly. "Losing mah guns. Dakota, this gold that mah—that Madden stole. Ah understand that yuh'll turn that ovah to the express company?"

"That's what I figgered to do."

"Ah'd be right watchful of that if Ah was you," suggested the Texan. "And take no chances of some stinkah shooting me in the back."

"Oh, come on!" snorted Callas impatiently. "You've lost your interest in that, Tex, if you ever had one. Where is our sack?" he demanded of Dakota.

"Right close." The cowboy rode back to the point and secured the sack.

"Throw it in here," was the rancher's crisp order. "Some of you will have to double up." He squinted at the body of Plane's Morgan lying in the road.

"I'll be bodyguard for this little old sack," said Dakota, wondering why Callas did not invite one of his bosses to ride in the buggy. "Baldy, I see yuh're ridin' Mac's big buckskin. It looks like he could pack Tex, too."

Scobel readily fell in with that suggestion and the lanky Texan mounted behind the deputy. Joe Callas had lost interest in ways and means of transportation, however.

"You better ride with me, Dakota," he urged. "I want you to tell me what you think of this team."

"I don't know a thing about harness animools," said the cowboy. "An' I never ride in a rig when I'm able tuh fork a hawss. What say we go? I'm plumb hollow for breakfast."

Callas frowned for a moment at the cowboy, then started his fancy team in the rear of the horsemen. Dakota fell in behind the buggy.

"My big hunch is gettin' ripe fast," mused Dakota grimly. "It's something about this loot."

Still, there were so many puzzling angles to this mystery that Dakota's suspicion refused to become definite. Callas appeared quite goofy about this stolen money, but surely a man of this big rancher's standing would have no hand in a double murder, with the stakes a mere five thousand dollars. Besides, one of the dead men was Callas' close friend. Those two bosses of his, though—Gillman and Brewster!

Dakota peered ahead. He could see Gillman riding with Scobel and the other deputies. But Buzz Brewster had disappeared.

CHAPTER VIII

Queer Antics of Callas

IT was not yet nine o'clock when the cavalcade of buggy and horsemen, with Dakota as rear guard, raised a dust in the narrow street of Coulee City, but the town appeared to have been astir for hours. Saddle ponies, buckboards and wagons lined the hitch-rails; punchers, ranchers and townsmen cluttered the sidewalks. Dakota was surprised that so many people could have gathered so early. Then he remembered that this would be the day of Dan McCarroll's funeral, and the sheriff had been a very popular man.

But as he observed the grim faces, overhead the sullen mutterings, sensed the sinister threat in the very air, Dakota realized that something more than funeral rites had caused these men to congregate. These plainsmen required only a little stirring up to become a mob. In the hard eyes that followed Scobel's prisoner down the street, it was plain to read that testimony and evidence had been considered, and that Tex Plane had been found guilty of the sheriff's murder.

As the party halted in front of the jail a number of men carrying rifles hurried out to the sidewalk. Dort Dorsey, the district attorney, a ponderous, gimlet-eyed man, waddled from the courthouse. Doc Beeber, the coroner, bustled with jerky stride from the jail. Baldy Scobel rode up to the jail door and hastily herded Plane inside.

"Let's go in with that stuff, Dakota," mumbled Callas, passing his reins to Gillman and climbing down from his seat. "I don't like the looks of things around here."

Dakota felt rather dubious of that mob, too, although it was no fear of a robbing attempt that worried him. The cowboy tied his horse, hunched the canvas sack under his arm and followed Callas inside. He observed that the rancher was encumbered by a leather saddle bag or mail pouch that he had taken from under the buggy seat.

"Let's go on back somewhere," suggested Callas nervously.

The rancher led down past the cells to the rear, impatiently ordered several loafers out of the kitchen and closed the back door. Then he dragged a chair against the inner door, dropped the leather bag beside it and gestured to Dakota.

"Throw that on the table and set down." Callas spoke through a white handkerchief with which he was mopping his face. "I want to talk to you."

"I can't talk, or even lissen good, till I eat," protested Dakota, investigating a skillet of frying ham on the stove. "Well," he sighed, "what's on your mind?"

"This hellish mess," muttered the rancher. "Here's a nice quiet town working itself straight to a lynching."

"Yuh mean they've sized Tex as that killer?"

"Of course. That warrant was just a stall to hold him on suspicion. But everybody's heard of the racket you had with Plane over that hat and coat. They are saying now that you recognized that Texan wearing that stuff. So these crazy fools won't wait for evidence. I wonder"—Callas leaned forward to peer into the cowboy's face—"if you couldn't get him away?"

Dakota considered that, squinting speculatively at the rancher. But he was not thinking of Plane's danger, nor of his own resolve to go to any lengths to save

the nervy Texan. Callas was all worked up over something else, Dakota reasoned, something that affected his own interests a whole lot more than the possible lynching of a strange gunman.

"I might," he said, "but I'd have tuh do that accordin' tuh law. If yuh'll get a deputy star pinned on me I'll take Tex down to Red Plains. Or do yuh mean yuh want him tuh hit the trail?"

"That don't matter. I'll get you fixed as a deputy." Callas started to rise, but dropped back into his chair. "Let's talk about this recovered gold first. Did I tell you about my interest in that? I was express agent when it was stolen. Sam Gowan, of the Novelty Saloon, was shipping five thousand to the bank at Red Plains. I helped him roll the twenties and seal 'em in that sack. But this Madden saw me give the sack to Jerry Cole, the stage driver, and after the stage had gone I saw Madden ride out. I got worried and tore across the ridge to warn Jerry.

"I was too late. I heard shots, but when I got under that Devil's Claw point I found Jerry hanging over the dashboard—dead. I chased Madden—slap into a couple of Double O punchers. We tried hard to make the bandit tell where he'd cached the sack, but he wouldn't. He got a life sentence for murder. Of course the express company made the five thousand good to Gowan, but they kept working on Madden. He finally consented to come and dig it up."

"Uh-huh." Dakota yawned, but that was to cover his very deep interest. "So yuh're right tickled to see that mark wiped offen your record as express agent."

"Yes. I've worried about that. The company was fine about it; didn't blame me or the driver. But some how I felt responsible. So you see how puffed up I'll feel to be able now to return that money."

"Well, that's easy." Dakota turned sadly from the odorous ham. "Let's mosey over to the express office with it."

"That wasn't what I meant," said Callas sharply. "I want to take that gold myself down to the district office at Red Plains. Listen, Dakota. I don't say much about it, but I'm kind of proud of the way I worked up from nothing to be the man this corner of the state wants for senator. I had a long hard row to hoe, but I dug through. Now to tell you straight, I was a whole lot responsible for getting Madden back here. McCarroll and I talked that convict into coming, and we got the governor to agree. So it looks like I should get a little credit. I want to walk into the office in Red Plains and plank that money down before the big boss. You see how I feel?"

"Sure, that's a good way to advertise for votes." Dakota was turning the slabs of ham with a fork. "Whoever's cookin' this is goin' tuh be out his breakfast. I'm goin' tuh eat."

"Then it's all right with you?" murmured Callas. "You'll let me get my little thrill by taking this gold to Red Plains?"

"Yeah." The cowboy was sniffing hopefully at a bubbling coffee pot. "But bein' as it's a dangerous job cartin' money across country, an' bein' as I feel some responsible myself, I'll go along."

"You won't need to bother. I have two good men who'll go with me. We'll start right now while everybody's excited here. Besides, you'll be busy. You're going to get this Plane away."

"I'm liable tuh be busy all right, agreed Dakota, forking ham upon an egg-smeared plate. "Yuh meanin' your treasure guard'll be them two yuh had out this mornin'?"

"Yes, Gillman and Brewster. They're good—"

"I agree with you. They're right good. But do you think Tex Plane done that killin'?"

"Oh, I don't know," sniffed Callas. "There's a lot of evidence against him."

"Uh-huh." Dakota poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down at a corner of the littered table. "I see."

Dakota saw a dark shadow in the woodpile. This Joe Callas claimed to be an ace-high friend of the dead sheriff, yet he was a whole lot more concerned now

over returning this stolen gold than he was over punishing McCarroll's murderer, or attending his friend's funeral. Here was the country's choice for high office obviously trying to get possession of a bandit's loot by sending a bothersome cowboy out of the way. And intimating that he didn't care a hoot if the suspected killer were turned loose. All of which looked quite suspicious to Dakota.

"Yes, you'll have to get him away." Callas returned from a scout to the side window. "Mac's friends are turning into a wolf pack right now. They're apt to start something right after the funeral. So we'd better get Plane away before that. I'll go out front and make a talk. You be ready to slip him out back."

Dakota finished his plate of ham and helped himself to more. "It don't look right that a big man like you oughta mix in this. Yuh might lose some votes. Better yuh leave the whole thing tuh me."

"I'm doing that," retorted Callas impatiently. "I know I can trust you to protect that Texan. So I'm leaving that to you while I take this gold to Red Plains. I'll wait till you get Plane out, then I'll throw this sack in the buggy and start right away. I was going to make the trip anyway." He glanced at the leather bag beside his chair.

"I jest can't let you take such chances." Dakota drained his coffee cup and looked longingly at the pot on the stove. "The gang that jumped Tex an' me this mornin' is right apt tuh lay for you down the road. Now, I'm a big lot interested in this Tex, an' I don't want tuh see him get his neck stretched, but as I said, I'm feelin' a little responsible about this other business. What say we take this sack over to the express office an' tuck it in the safe there until things get smooth? Then we'll make that trip to Red Plains."

In the act of starting further argument, Callas relaxed for a frowning study of the innocent features of the cowboy.

"All right," he sighed. "Let's slip out back."

Dakota juggled the canvas sack under his coat and followed Callas out. The rancher, carrying his leather bag, led down an alley and turned into the rear door of the express office. A red-headed boy in checkered overalls greeted his callers with a grin.

"I know what you come for. You're just in time to get that on the stage." He nodded to the bag that Callas carried. "I heard about you finding that bandit's cache."

"We don't want it to go out on the stage," snapped Callas. "It ain't in this mail pouch anyway. Here"—he indicated the sack Dakota had dropped upon the counter—"put that in your safe until tomorrow, Red. Then I'm taking it to Red Plains myself."

"That's right," drawled Dakota, watching the agent rearranging the littered contents of his safe to find a place for the sack. "Me an' Mister Callas ain't takin' no chances of another stage robbery. We're takin' that out ourselves."

"Here!" called Callas, as the agent moved to close the safe door. "Stick this in there, too." He tossed over the leather bag. "It's some horse money I've been keeping in my desk. But with so many strange devils around I don't feel easy about it. I'll take it out to the bank tomorrow."

"Gosh, I feel better," sighed Dakota, as the two walked out the front door. "If I'd 'a' lost that sack I'd mebbe been arrested—for stealin' calves, or something."

Callas and Dakota returned openly to the front of the jail, where the rancher climbed into his buggy and drove away. Dakota observed that Champ Gillman did not accompany his employer, but joined a group of loiterers across the street. The cowboy wondered if Gillman had noticed Callas and himself coming from the express office.

"I jest had tuh eat your breakfast, Baldy," confessed Dakota when he found Scobel in the kitchen. "But yuh can cook some more while I talk. Am I right that yuh're the big boss of this hotel now?"

"Yeh. Dorsey asked me to hold it down till they could 'lect a reg'lar sheriff. He wants me to run—but dang it! I wish now I had made him eat my star. I've got this Tex person in a bad hole."

"Who started that idee of arrestin' him?"

"Joe Callas. He come aroun' 'fore daylight this mornin' an' asked for you. I found out then that your hoss was gone. Joe got awful excited. Dorsey had fixed up a lot of warrants for me, but Joe seemed to pick special on Tex. Wanted me to r'ar right out after him. When I didn't act anxious, danged if Joe didn't start to sneak off alone up Devil's Claw way. But them two bosses of his'n horned in with him, so I picked up some of the boys an' went along to see what it was all about."

"It looks like Callas wanted tuh get you outa the way," said Dakota. "Yuh think Tex is that bushwacker?"

"He don't look that kind. What you say, Dakoty?"

"Not him! An' I'm backin' that, Baldy. I've got a lot acquainted with that lad. That convict was his brother all right, an' when Tex tried tuh get him loose, he was doin' jest what a old scorpion called Baldy Scobel would 'a' done. An' mebbe me myself. So Tex an' me are ridin' together till we nab that killer."

"I'm feared yuh won't git much help from Tex." The deputy's troubled eyes sought the side window. "Chances are he'll end up on that big cottonwood down by the crick."

"We'll see that he don't. Yuh got help, ain't yuh?"

"Yeh, I sweared in some fellers. But they'll crawl quick in a hole if their friends come after Tex."

"It looks like yuh're right there," sighed Dakota. "Yuh got that convict buried?"

"Doc Beeber planted him 'fore daylight. He's goin' tuh bury Mac pretty soon. Yeh, here comes the wagin."

CHAPTER IX

"He Is Ouah Man!"

THOSE in charge of the funeral of Dan McCarrol appeared nervous, and in an anxious hurry to get the sad duty over with. A minister mumbled a prayer on the jail steps, the coffin was loaded on a buckboard, and a motley procession followed it to the cemetery back of the town.

"Seems like I oughta go see Mac buried," muttered Scobel. "But I hadn't better leave Tex."

"Go on," urged Dakota. "I'll watch him for yuh."

Scobel peered sharply at the cowboy, scratched his ear and grinned.

"I see. Better let me pin a star on yuh, Dakoty. Yeh, that's the best way. The keys are hangin' on that nail in the kitchen. An' "—he turned at the door to grimace at Dakota—"that Calico hoss of mine is a hill-coverin' sonuvagun."

Dakota stood in the door, his hat in his hand, and sadly watched the slow-moving buckboard as it carried Dan McCarroll on his last ride. A hot lump burned in the cowboy's throat. A real big man, this old sheriff had been, a staunch upholder of the law, yet ever watchful for the spark of decency deep buried in a criminal heart. It was said of McCarroll that he would often fight harder to save a man from prison than he would to send one there. Many a wild puncher, hitting the bandit trail for the first time, had been given a fresh start by Dan McCarroll.

"Poor old Mac," murmured Dakota. "I reckon he's got lots of mourners—like me. An' he never knew—that I remembered. If I could only repay him."

Of course the old code of the West would govern in this case. Dakota would see that McCarroll's murderer was punished. But more and more was Dakota depressed by the sad reasoning that the debt he owed Dan McCarroll was a matter of the heart, a close, friendly thing that no avenging bloodshed could wipe out.

Dakota tramped back to the kitchen, secured the ring of keys, and with Plane's two belts draped over his shoulder, he proceeded to the Texan's cell. He unlocked the door and nodded a greeting to the cool man sitting on the bunk.

"Jest a minnit of talk now, Tex, tuh figger what tuh do. Soon as this buryin' is over they's goin' tuh be fireworks."

"You alone in heah?" Plane was buckling on his guns.

"Yeh, everybody's gone tuh the graveyard. Not a man left in town."

"An' wheah is that sack?"

"In the express office safe. It was a dubious job gettin' it there, but I made her. Now, what was yuh hintin' about that sack? Yuh got onto something?"

"Jest a guess. It don't look right that so many men would go plumb loony ovah five thousand dollahs. Them three lizahds Ah brought in would kill a dozen men fo' less, but they wasn't in this—they was heah in town. That little Brewstah, though, and his nose-busted pahd—and theah boss, Callas! Ah reckon you noticed how keen that ranchah was about your sack."

"I sure did! Yeh, he was goin' tuh miss his friend's funeral tuh run quick with that money tuh Red Plains. But he didn't seem a-tall happy about me goin' with him. He was awful anxious for me tuh herd you outa here—jest like he wanted tuh ditch me. There's something tricky about that sack, Tex. I wish we'd cut that thing open this mornin'."

The booming roar of a shot broke the funeral quiet of the street. A screaming "Help!" was nearly drowned in a muffled outburst of savage cursing. A dog ran ki-yi-ing down the street.

"The express office!" exclaimed Dakota. "I guessed that might come off—but I forgot. Com'on, Tex."

The first thing Dakota saw when he reached the sidewalk was a saddled horse standing on the big scales in front of the express office. Before the cowboy could more than start to run in that direction, a man, masked with a red bandanna over face and head, plunged from the door of the express office and hurled the weight box of the scales to fling himself upon the horse.

Had Dakota so desired he could easily have dropped the masked man with his first shot, but he was sure the whistle of a bullet would halt the bandit. He hesitated to take chances of definitely silencing a source of information that might solve the mystery of that canvas sack. Besides, he observed that while the masked robber carried the leather bag that Callas had deposited in the safe, he did not have that sack.

But Dakota's warning shot and shouted order failed to impress the fleeing man. The cowboy fired again just as the fugitive dashed into the alley beyond the hotel, but although he tried for a hit that time, he was an instant too late. He snorted disgustedly over his squeamish failure to disable the bandit with that first shot, and ran into the office. He was conscious of Tex Plane tearing past, intent on reaching the hotel corner in time to get a shot at the escaping robber.

Dakota found the young agent lying on the floor back of the counter, groaning and trying awkwardly to wrap a towel round a bleeding shoulder. The safe door stood open.

"He made me open it!" moaned the boy. "Then he tried to kill me—just because I batted him with a chair."

Dakota examined the torn shoulder and bandaged it with the towel.

"Only the makin's of a little vacation, son. We'll have the doc for yuh soon as that funeral breaks up. Say! That feller wasn't packin' my white sack."

"He didn't get it!" muttered the agent with angry satisfaction. "I had it hid back of some books. He didn't look at all. Just acted like he was after that grip Joe Callas brought in."

Dakota hastened to the safe, thrust aside a mess of books and papers and drew out the sack.

"Mebbe now he made a mistake." Dakota tucked the sack under his coat. "Gosh! If that waddy thinks this was in that leather mail pouch—he'll be awful sick when he counts out a few hundred dollars of horse money."

Repeating his promise to send the doctor to the wounded agent, Dakota hurried outside. Tex was just returning from a futile chase after the bandit.

"Ah got a good sight of him," panted the Texan. "But he was too fah fo' a shot. It was that crooked-nose Gillman, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, I seen one of his toadstool ears. But I'm thinkin' he didn't get what he thinks he did. He must 'a' seen Callas packin' that mail bag under the buggy seat an' figgered we used it tuh cart that money

tuh the express office. But we didn't. I got that funny sack right here—an' we're goin' back tuh the jail an' open it up."

Several women and children peered uneasily from doors and windows as the two passed, but not a man was in sight. All were at the cemetery, which fact probably had inspired Gillman in his lone-hand robbery attempt.

The cowboy led into the jail office, produced his little knife and slit the canvas sack down the side. While the Texan leaned forward expectantly, Dakota dumped the heavy contents of the sack upon the desk. Plane reached out to turn one of the paper-wrapped cylinders until he could read a penciled scrawl upon it.

"Five hundred dollahs. And with the express seal on it. That looks all straight. Yeah, theah are ten of them—that makes five thousand."

"An' Joe Callas put his name on 'em—a sort of guarantee—mebbe." Dakota slipped his knife blade under the wax seal and broke it loose. Then he picked out the folds and removed the paper wrapping. "It's a funny old world, Tex," he murmured. "Got the makin's? I left mine in the kitchen."

The Texan reached mechanically to his vest pocket. Dakota rolled his cigarette and returned the makings. Plane's long fingers deftly formed a smoke, but his slit-eyed stare never wavered from the desk top, and what the opened sack now revealed.

"So Callas is our man! No wondah he wanted desperate to get this sack. You heahd that ol' stage-robbing story, Dakota?"

"I heard it. It's hell, Tex. Yeh, it's all right plain now. Callas got one of them skunks of his tuh bushwack Mac an' your brother—so he could get—this."

"An' mah brothah—went to the pen—and to his death—fo' that!" Tex Plane's voice was breaking. "The cahds do run strange at times."

Dakota wrapped up the cylinder he had opened and dropped it into his pocket. But by now his mind had found contradictions.

"We better go easy, Tex. I remember now how sick Callas got when I told him Mac was dead. It wasn't no play-actin' that made him 'most faint right there. That was bad news tuh him—awful bad news."

"Maybe he got one of his stinkah bosses just to hol' up the sheriff," reasoned Plane, "and get that sack. With the dirty robbah doing the killing on his own hook."

"That lissens more reasonable." Dakota began returning the rolls to the split sack. "Uh-huh. Either Brewster or Gillman is our killer, but both of 'em was in on it. They got the news last night that I'd seen something of that dry-gulch business, but they didn't know how much. So they laid for me. Soon as they seen their boss they found out that I hadn't spotted the killer, but that I'd grabbed onto that sack. When Callas couldn't bamboozle me into lettin' him have it, he slipped them the tip tuh rob the express office. It seems tuh me that Callas is right foolish tuh trust them two scalawags—with this." He nodded to the cut-open sack.

"Ah'd say he would have to raise theah pay right smaht. But he won't need worry about that now—with them only getting a leathah bag. Well, what next, Dakota? Do we play our cahd?"

"We'd better have a talk with Callas. He'll come through. Then we'll go after the real killer. Someway, Tex, I'm feelin' we better let the law take care of that old rancher."

"Ah would let the law handle all of them," was Plane's surprising comment, "if that were possible. But it ain't. That Brewster stinkah is a right fancy gunshahk—and he will fight. You ready?" The Texan picked up the sack and started down the hall.

"Yeah. Yuh can grab Baldy's pinto. I'll get White— Gosh! Here they come back from the funeral. Comin' in both ways. An' I hear that law-houn' Dorsey!"

"You better lock me up," suggested Plane coolly, and turned into the cell he had occupied, at the same time unbuckling his belts. "Ah won't have you tangling with the law on mah account."

"I'll do that, but I wouldn't if I didn't know Baldy would get yuh out. I'll be

right back anyway. Better hide that sack under the bunk with your guns. No chance for me tuh slip it out now."

Scarcely had Dakota locked the cell door when the district attorney and several townsmen crowded in through the office. Scobel entered through the kitchen, scowling fiercely upon observing that the Texan was in his cell.

"I thought you was goin' to git him out," grumbled the deputy, when he had followed Dakota into the kitchen. "Say, what's this I hear about the express office bein' robbed?"

"It was," admitted Dakota. "But the robber didn't get much. That kid agent put up a fight though an' got shot. You go hunt the doctor for him soon as I'm gone."

"Gone? Where yuh goin'?"

"After the feller that killed Mac."

"Yuh know who?"

"I got the makin's of good evidence. Now lissen, Baldy. I want yuh to think back to the time of that old stage robbery. Do you 'member if in them days they had a different rail out in front of the express office—alongside of them scales?"

"Huh?" Scobel's mind refused to jump that gap. "A rail? I dunno."

"Think a little," urged Dakota. "There's a pole bar now fastened tuh iron posts that have holes in 'em like to have held a iron bar. Was there—"

"Sure!" The deputy brightened. "Usta be a iron hitch-rail, but some drunk punchers 'stole it one night. But what's that got tuh do with—anything?"

"A lot. Fellers has been hung for lesser things than stealin' a hitch-rail."

"Aw, Dakotay, what yuh up to?"

"I'm off on a scout for that killer. Now you watch out for Tex. If things get dubious, you get him out. I'll be back right quick—an' mebbe with a prisoner that'll make your eyes pop."

Upon Scobel's mumbled promise to release the Texan at the first opportunity, Dakota hurried out to White Foot. The street was now filled with the crowd returning from the funeral. The cowboy halted beside a horse tied to one of the posts at the express office scales, swung down and fumbled for a moment at the round hole in the iron post.

"Things are fittin'," he murmured, and rode on up the street. "But that old Callas! Is he a devil—or jest a poor victim, like what Mac was always workin' on?"

CHAPTER X

A Beaten Man Revives

JOE CALLAS had driven his buggy in the funeral procession to the drab cemetery on the hill. With a trance-like stare he had watched the coffin disappear in the grave, had listened without hearing to the hollow thuds of falling gravel. When the mourning friends of the dead sheriff turned away, the rancher drove across to the lane that led to his stone ranch house.

At the woven-wire gate that gave entrance to the spick-and-span ranch yard he halted, looking expectantly down the street-like line of bunkhouse, stables, blacksmith shop and tool sheds. The half-breed chore boy was usually on hand to open the gate and take care of the grays, but there was no sign of him now. Yet Callas waited, holding tight reins on his restless team, staring out across a field of alfalfa, green from recent irrigating.

Callas was proud of this great ranch, prouder still of the dogged perseverance that it represented. For years ambition and hard knocks had picked upon the career of Joe Callas for a battleground. First a puncher on various ranches, then a roustabout slave at the Coulee City Livery, finally the sixty-a-month agent for the express company. A little of advancement through the years, yet Callas had fretted over the slowness of his progress toward the big things of his dreams. Always he had wanted to own a ranch, to raise good stock, to become a man of standing in his community. Even during the hard, slow years at the livery stable and express office he had hopefully pictured a future in which friends and neighbors would respect him, defer to him, seek his advice.

All those dreams had come true. Here was the richest ranch in the country,

stocked with thoroughbred Morgans and Herefords, highly improved, an ideal home. At the polls in November Joe Callas would be elected to the state legislature. Up to yesterday the future had been bright with the fulfillment of ambition. But with the tragic death of Dan McCarroll—Callas shivered and looked again for the chore-boy.

"Everybody went to the funeral," he sighed, and got down to open the gate. "I even seen the Chink cook hunting flowers. But I didn't see Champ and Buzz there."

Thought of those two trusted employees brought a puzzled squint to the rancher's eyes. Callas had acquired Champ Gillman, now his foreman, by an act of human kindness, a quality born of his friendly association with Dan McCarroll. The sheriff had argued against a reforming attempt in the case of Gillman, but Callas, needing an experienced horse man, had won out.

As the rancher drove down the yard a man slouched out of the bunkhouse. Callas drew up his team, scowling at the queer purple splotch that ringed the giant stranger's right eye.

"You work here?" asked Callas.

"Not yit." The big man lifted his lumpy shoulders in a scornful shrug. "But mebbe."

Two more men came from the bunkhouse. One was a slender Mexican, the other a remarkably good imitation of a fat porker.

"Well, you might break in a little by unhitching this team." Holding tightly to the reins, Callas climbed down. "Everybody seems gone."

"We ain't started work yit." The big man grinned at his mates. "Ain't right sure we'll git a job. Have to see the boss first."

"I'm the owner," said Callas shortly. "And I don't think we need any more crew just now. Who sent you?"

"Big-nosed little feller runned into our camp this mornin'. Said to come see the foreman. We're waitin' for him now."

Time there had been when Joe Callas would have firmly ordered those three hard-lookers off the place, and seen to it that they went. But now he appeared to have no energy even for talk. Walking at the side, he drove on to the wagon shed, unhitched and unharnessed his grays. This was the first time in years that he had attended to such chores.

As he crossed the yard to the house the rancher was thinking again of Champ Gillman and his hawk-faced crony, Brewster. Those two had changed almost overnight. Respect and deference toward their employer had become since yesterday a don't-give-a-damn familiarity.

With dragging steps Callas passed through his kitchen and shuffled heavily down a hall to his office in a front corner. He stumbled over a pile of kindling on the hearth of the brick fireplace, crossed to the front window and raised a shade. Then he slumped into his armchair at the big oak desk and stared out through the window.

"It's just got to work!" he muttered. "But that Dakota isn't the fool kid he looks to be. He's sharp, and he suspects something already. I wonder—if I told him—straight—"

The rancher's gaze focused upon the corrugated iron roof of the stone jail in the town below. He shuddered and jerked his eyes away. It seemed as if everywhere he could see the dead face of Dan McCarroll.

Footsteps boomed hollowly in the kitchen. Buzz Brewster came in followed by Gillman. The smaller man was dragging a gunny sack that bumped heavily across the floor. The rancher's steel-trap mouth tightened.

"'Lo, boss," greeted Gillman familiarly. "The boys said you was home."

"Did you hire that bunch of range scum, Champ?" demanded Callas. "We don't need that kind on this ranch."

"I sent 'em," put in Brewster. "I went up to our Jackass shack where they was camped. With all this killin' goin' on—an' with our boss fixed the way he is—I thought mebbe we needed them three."

"What you mean?" The rancher peered at the gunny sack. "What you got there?"

"The makin's of a nice raise in pay," Champ Gillman took it upon himself to

reply. "An' you'd better come through—"

The cool Brewster silenced his pard with a gesture. "It's this way, Joe. We are right wise to what you're up against. Seein' as we're workin' for you, an' like our job fine, we're goin' to see you through—even if we have to hold off every sheriff an' dippity in this state."

"You drunk—or crazy?" snapped Callas, splotches of color cutting his haggard cheeks. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Show him, Buzz," snorted Gillman. "Let him see what we found hid in the 'spress office."

"He knows what it is." Brewster lifted the gunny sack to the desk and caught it by the lower corners. "He looks like he had a bad bellyache right now."

Callas was slowly sagging, his white lips quivering, his eyes fixed upon the sack.

"Wait!" The rancher threw up his hand in a panicky gesture. "Just what do you want?"

"We want a raise," sneered Gillman. "A real raise. The kind that'll make us pards with you, Joe. So we can give a few orders of our own aroun' here, an' help you sell your fancy horses an' spankin' cows, an' set in here with our feet on this desk. We want equal thirds with you in this ranch."

"So that's it!" snarled the rancher, a trapped animal in his flare of rage. "You two been laying for something like this ever since you come here. Mac was right about you, Gillman. But you'd never have had the brains to put over a hold-up like this. You, Brewster, figured this out. Well, you've got me. But I'll never partner with scum like you. I'll sell the ranch and pay that way."

Gillman started a sneering acceptance of that, but Buzz Brewster interrupted his impulsive mate. "I don't reckon, Joe. I've allus hankered to be a rancher, settin' pretty, with a big man standin' back of me to see that my past don't sometime fly up an' slap me. You're fine for that, Joe. They say you got a pull that'd keep the worst kind of a outlaw from goin' up. But could you keep yourself from goin' up?"

As if the stimulation of anger had worn away, the rancher dropped deep in his chair, moistening his chalky lips, shrinking from the two men as if he saw them as executioners.

Brewster, enjoying hugely the encouraging results of his demand, sought to postpone the final shock, and dropped the gunny sack unopened. But sight of the victory that was plain to be read in the rancher's near terror, spurred Gillman toward the triumphant climax.

"Open her up, Buzz. Let him take a good long look. So he'll see for sure what'd happen if we turned this over to Dorsey. No jury in the world could help but string Joe Callas for murder."

"Murder!" The rancher shot to his feet, to hang tense across his desk. "No! I'd explain—I'd tell the whole business. Everybody knows that Mac and me were close friends. I'll tell what we planned to do. How we were going to—O-oh! That's how you got onto this! You spied in here the other night—heard Mac and me talking."

"Mebbe," drawled Brewster, reaching again for the gunny sack. "But we won't be testifyin' about that, Joe. An' nobody lookin' at what we got here"—he flipped the sack up and out—"kin help readin' the sign. A straight trail from this to the man what killed that convict an' Dan McCarroll."

At first Callas did not see the thing that fell upon the desk. He had sunk back in his chair, with his eyes tight closed as if to shut out a horror that he knew was to be revealed.

"There you are, Joe." Champ Gillman jerked out a strap that ran through a series of loops to secure the mouth of an old leather mail bag. "Yeh, that sack's in here all right. We looked to make sure."

Intent on opening the bag, neither of the two observed the startling change that came over Joe Callas, when finally he looked. A little of color was brightening his cheeks and his eyes were losing their deadness.

"Biggest joke I ever heard!" chortled Gillman. "That poor devil Madden stealin' this an' goin' to the pen. That Tex

hirin' three good men—an' payin' 'em with this. Five thousand dollars—so they say. But we know it's worth more'n that, don't we, Joe? Depends on the market—like you say about Morgan hosses."

A white canvas sack had rolled from the mail pouch. Callas leaned closer, clutching the arms of his chair, breathing hard. And when he relaxed even the rather clever Brewster could have read from his deep sigh only final acceptance of fate.

"Give him a look inside, Buzz," urged Gillman. "Have to cut her. Here's my knife."

Brewster took the knife, but before he could open it Callas' cold and very steady voice caused the little horse boss to jerk round, to face a man who looked to be a very discouraging prospect for blackmail.

"Before you do that," said Callas, plucking a cigar from a box on the desk, "I'll have my say." He paused to light the cigar with cool deliberation. "I banked on you as a square man, Gillman—at first. But McCarroll thought different all the time. Finally he convinced me that you were not the sort that could be straight. So we fixed up a little trick to find out just how rotten crooked you two were. It worked."

Gillman twisted his battered face to the side until his broken nose crept nearly to his toadstool ear. Buzz Brewster blinked and stroked his hawk beard with a dirty finger.

"I see you've got the idea," went on Callas grimly, sliding ink bottles aside to reach an ash tray. "Yes, Mac and me put up a little job on you boys. We knew you were listening in here that night when we talked about this." He nodded to the canvas sack. "First we thought we'd see if you'd try to steal five thousand dollars. But Mac thought you were after big money. So we hung big money up for you. And you gobbled our bait like the suckers you are."

"What the hell does he mean, Buzz?" spluttered the bewildered Gillman.

"I mean I've fooled you into spilling the whole thing," snapped Callas. "You know what I was after, don't you? I wanted to make sure that one of you killed McCarroll. And I did!"

"You did, huh?" purred Brewster. "Well, see can you make sure what's goin' to happen to you."

The rancher smiled at that, smiled in the taunting manner of a man who prefers death to torture.

"He's out on a limb, Buzz." But Gillman's suggestion lacked sincerity. "Jest a bluff. Cut that open an' show him."

"Cut it open!" rasped Callas. "Then take it like the bungling crooks you are—and ride!"

Brewster withdrew his calculating gaze from the rancher, and slit a hole in the canvas sack. Gillman reached past his mate to pluck out a coin-roll. Thick fingers fumbled at the wax-sealed paper, tore it off. Gold twenties rolled across the desk and jingled on the floor.

Coldly impassive, Joe Callas watched the wide-eyed amazement of the two. Strangely, sight of yellow gold failed to bring to them the least of satisfaction. Brewster broke the paper from another of the rolls, glared at the row of coin edges, hurled the money across the room. Gillman, cursing as if from habit, began picking twenties from the floor and stowing them in his pocket. In the act of transferring the unbroken rolls to the gunny sack, the foreman abandoned his salvaging job to whirl upon his mate.

"Braggin' about bein' smart!" he sneered. "Goin' to make us easy for life. Look now at the mess you got us into."

Brewster made no defense. He was squinting at Callas, who was fondling his cigar, a very rock of coolness. Finally the little man nodded.

"Well, we got this much—if we can git away with it."

"We'll fix that!" raged Gillman. "This old geezer won't start nobody after us."

Callas had no fear to show them now. He smiled grimly at the antics of his two late bosses, let his eyes drop to the closed drawer of his desk, reached out to tap his cigar in the ash tray.

"I won't be the first man you've shot in the back," he said.

"No, Champ!" Brewster caught his mate's gun arm. "No more killin'. Seein' as we don't have to. We'll tie Joe up—an' blow."

Gillman growled his savage protest, but Brewster, again the master that he was, gestured toward the rear. "Go git a rope."

Gillman went out, still muttering. Brewster lolled upon the desk. Joe Callas toyed with his cigar, slid the ash tray to a position just above the desk drawer.

"Got suthin' in there, Joe?" queried Brewster. "It won't do you no good."

Gillman's returning footsteps sounded in the kitchen. Callas clawed wildly at the desk drawer, jerked it open, fumbled for his gun. But the watching Brewster's fist lashed out with the speed of a striking rattler, and his plunging body followed the blow. Callas and his chair went over backward with the little outlaw on top. Then Gillman was sitting on the rancher's legs and working with a lariat.

"There you are, Joe," grunted Brewster, when a tying job had been well done. "A bit in your mouth now—so's you can't cuss the Chink if he comes wakin' you up." He gagged the rancher with a piece of window curtain. "Now we'll jest dump him in that closet back of his bedroom, Champ."

They carried the bound man into the closet, dropped him ungently there and returned to the office.

"Chicken feed!" Gillman slammed the gunny sack upon the desk. "After the big pile we had figgered. An' he was trickin' us all the time. Buzz, we jest got to finish him. He knows I—we killed the sheriff. He'll peddle that an' the hull country'll be after us."

"I don't reckon he'll talk." Brewster perched upon the desk and rolled a cigarette. "Champ, I don't know why I trail along with a fool like you. Why, you bonehead, the game ain't up yet—not by a jugful."

"Huh? Whatcha mean?"

"I mean that you're the one that fizzled—in that robbin' stunt. Why, you pore silly, I bet you run off an' left the thing we want right in that safe."

"Hell, no! I seen Joe an' that Dakoty slippin' out back with that ol' mail sack."

"Sure, but if you'd had eyes you'd seen this leather bag of Joe's before. He lugged it down town with him las' night—an' he had it under the buggy seat this mornin'. If you had only one think in yore wooden head you'd know why he was packin' it aroun'."

"Huh?" Gillman's eyes widened and his jaw sagged. "You mean they's two sacks an' we didn't git the right one?"

"That's it. Couldn't you see how the ol' man come quick to life soon as he seen his mail bag? He knowed then that we'd slipped. But we ain't through—not yit. The stuff we want is still in that safe—or else Dakoty's got it."

"He's got it!" wailed Gillman. "He seen me ride off. So our goose is cooked."

"Is it?" sneered Brewster. "Use yore head, Champ. Dakoty won't turn that evidence to the law—not right at first anyway. He might figger to make something out of it like we did. More like, though, he'll be all worked up to git the feller that killed McCarrol. He'll hang onto that funny stuff an' foller his nose—an' the stink'll lead him straight to Joe Callas."

"But that Tex feller!" mumbled Gillman. "Him an' Dakoty has joined up?"

"I know other outfits that has joined up." Brewster shouldered the gunny sack and headed for the rear. "Remember the nice army I picked up? I thought mebbe we'd have use for them. Com'on. I know a way to settle that Tex lad. An' ol' Joe hisself is the bait to ketch that smart Dakoty. But we got to hussle."

CHAPTER XI

What the Sack Held

DAKOTA dismounted at the Callas gate, flipped his reins over a picket and peered with admiration up the geranium-lined gravel path to the deep, vine-shaded porch. His inspection of the stone house itself was interrupted by a spatter of rain upon his hat.

"Here comes that fall storm they been predictin'," he groaned. "My sore arms'll jest go wild now. I wonder did I leave my slicker in the stable?"

Dakota rapped on the door, waited, but could hear no sound inside. After hammering again without response, he walked to the rear, glancing across the ranch yard as he rounded the corner. He saw no one, but sight of the rancher's buggy in a shed told him that Callas must be at home.

Failing to raise anybody from his back door knocking, Dakota entered, surveyed the big kitchen and proceeded down the hall.

"Hello!" he called. "Where's everybody?"

There was no reply to his hail. There was nobody in the office. The cowboy was backing out with the idea of exploring the yard and stables when he sighted in the charred blackness of the fireplace the leather pouch that he had seen Callas carry into the express office.

"Uh-huh! They've talked over the bad news—an' beat it."

Hurrying now, bent upon seeking for signs of flight outside, Dakota tore out through the kitchen. But at the door he was halted by thumping sounds somewhere inside. He called and the house fairly shook with the hammering reply. In a moment Dakota had traced that racket to the closet and was peering with considerable surprise at the bound and gagged rancher, still kicking the wall.

"Takin' a nap?" drawled the cowboy, and pulled Callas out. "Doggone! Sleepin' on the floor, with two-three soft beds in the house. Well-well! A rope—an' a dirty rag tuh keep yuh from snorin'."

Continuing to murmur nonsense as a cover for racing thought, Dakota removed the gag, cut the rope and helped the rancher to his feet.

"Yuh ain't hurt, are yuh?" he asked, sobering.

"No, but I—I don't know yet why they didn't kill me."

"Yeah? So the bad news made them two noble bosses of your'n turn on you."

"That scum!" flared Callas. "How'd you know they—they got me?"

"Didn't. It was something else I wanted tuh see you about. Yuh able tuh walk out to your soft chair?"

Dakota hooked a hand under the rancher's arm, an action that caused Callas to shiver, so much was that the manner of Sheriff McCarroll when escorting a prisoner to jail.

Upon reaching the office Callas dropped weakly into his chair. Dakota dangled his legs from the corner of the desk, squinting at the rancher and toying with a red-ink bottle. Finally the cowboy produced a paper-wrapped cylinder from his pocket and dropped it upon the desk. The loosened paper slipped away to leave its contents exposed.

A slight shiver was the rancher's only reaction to sight of the thing that lay before him. He nodded slowly, spoke with an effort.

"After all these years!"

"After all these years," echoed Dakota, "the time has come tuh talk."

Joe Callas jerked eagerly questioning eyes to the cowboy's face, but found nothing of encouragement there. His tired sigh spoke of defeat and resignation.

"It had to come," he muttered. "It was in the cards. For ten years I've been waiting—fearing." His dull eyes fastened upon a deputy's badge on Dakota's checkered shirt. "I'll take my medicine."

"We'll talk first," suggested Dakota. "I want your yarn—right from the beginnin'. This thing started, I reckon, about the time yuh took the iron bar out by them scales an' cut it up with a hacksaw—tuh make things like this." He indicated the short steel cylinder that had made a perfect substitute for a roll of twenties. "Yeah, I jest fitted this dingus in the hole that bar come out of."

"You seem to know." Callas appeared quite cool now that the blow had fallen. "Yes, I'll tell it straight. This is my finish—but what matters? A man always pays. I've been in hell for ten years."

"I reckon mebbe yuh paid a lot," said Dakota coolly. "But it didn't buy yuh much—only got two men killed."

"You don't think that—that I had anything to do with that?" Callas shuddered.

"I'm not a judge or a jury," replied Dakota. "I'm an officer, an'—like Dan McCarroll done—I'm askin' a man what's in pretty deep tuh tell his side."

Hope brightened in the rancher's eyes, then faded. He spoke harshly, as if to keep his voice from breaking.

"Jerry Cole, the stage driver, started it. He was in the express office when Sam Gowan brought that five thousand in. Jerry suggested a way to get that money. I was ambitious to get a start—and the going had been slow. We made the deal to split fifty-fifty. I sawed up that hitch-rail bar and fixed the fake rolls in the same sack. Jerry Cole was to drop it in a mess of quicksand just below the Little Cheyenne crossing, and say he'd been held up."

"Yuh went to a lot of fool bother," sniffed Dakota. "Yuh wouldn't needed tuh sent a sack a-tall. The stage driver could 'a' said he was stuck up an—"

"You don't know Sam Gowan. I did. Sam was right there to see his money go on the stage. He insisted on opening the sack for Jerry to count the rolls, and made Jerry write him a personal receipt."

"I see," nodded Dakota. "Well, your fancy plan slipped up."

"Yes, Madden got his eye on that sack, and hustled out to get it. I got panicky and rode across the ridge to Devil's Claw. I was too late."

Dakota listened without comment as Callas told again of the capture of Madden, and of the efforts to get the bandit to reveal the hiding place of his loot. The rancher confessed that those efforts to recover the sack had made him a nervous wreck, for the finding of those fake rolls, with their damning testimony of express seal and Callas' signature, would have promptly sent him to a prison cell. But the sheriff and many volunteer searchers had failed to find Madden's cache. The bandit had stubbornly refused to aid them.

"I was in hell right from the start," went on Callas. "Always I had the fear that sometime that fake sack would show up. But I used the five thousand. I worked hard, mostly to keep from worrying. I prospered. I bought this ranch, made friends, became popular. But the big thing those troubled years brought to me—was the heart of Dan McCarroll."

"His heart was there to find," murmured Dakota. "Mac saved me from goin' to the pen—or worse. So I'm guessin' that Mac— Jest when did you tell him—about that sack?" Dakota's long fingers rolled the steel cylinder.

"I don't remember. It was a long time ago. Mac and I had got to playing together—trying to do something for the poor devils he run up against. I told him. He suggested working on Madden. We did that, and Madden finally consented to come back and dig up his cache. Mac went and got him."

Dakota crossed the fireplace hearth, selected a stick of pine kindling and began shaving slender curls from it with his tiny knife.

"And then —" Callas sighed; the stick-whittling cowboy's cold unconcern was ominous. "Gillman or Brewster heard Mac and me planning to switch sacks. I'd had that in mind for years—to make good by trying to slip in five thousand in real money if the fake sack was found. So those two devils schemed to hold me up for everything I got."

"That looks to be the way of it," agreed Dakota. "They got onto your secret. One of 'em went after that sack—an' figgered the easiest way was tuh kill Mac an' his prisoner. So you an' Mac doped out the idee of switchin' sacks, did yuh?"

"I did—long before I got friendly with Mac. I fixed a sack with real money over five years ago, before I bought this ranch. I got the same kind of sack, and picked old twenties, and rolled 'em the same. I didn't know what I could do, but I was ready."

"Well, I reckon Mac knew what he was doin'," said Dakota, and picked up a shaving that had fallen outside the hearth. "That was kind of a joke on them two—jumpin' you with the real money. I wonder did they fool you any?"

"They did at first." Callas shuddered. "I gave the whole thing away, but as soon as I saw that old mail bag I knew what had happened and I braced up. They went off thinking it was all a trick Mac and I had pulled to see if they were honest."

"Yeah!" drawled Dakota, scowling at

the slender pine ribbon curling over his knife blade. "That bein' so, they've hit the trail. Any idee where they'll go?"

"I don't know. I had a suspicion at the last that maybe Brewster had caught on, and that they would try again. They have dirty help enough. Brewster left us at Devil's Claw, you remember. Well, he went to hunt those three that Tex Plane brought in here."

"Is that right?" Dakota frowned thoughtfully at the rancher. "Yeh, Sonora told Tex he usta be pards with that Brewster. Where are them three."

"They were in the bunkhouse. I suppose they went with Champ and Buzz."

"Joined up! Five real, bad, gun-slingin' outlaws. A right promisin' combination."

Dakota tossed his stick into the fireplace and returned to sit upon the desk. As Callas must have surmised, the cowboy's thought was far from the old crime that had caused this trouble. Dakota was now the bloodhound, sniffing the trail of Dan McCarroll's murderer.

And he was now convinced that he would not have far to go. That blackmailing pair, one of whom was the killer, had not given up and fled. Brewster was rather shrewd. Given opportunity to think matters over he would recall that Callas had carried that old mail pouch, and would suspect the significance of that. One more think from there, and Brewster would know that Gillman had overlooked the fake sack in the safe.

"We better mosey down town, Joe," said Dakota, and dropped the chunk of iron bar into his pocket. "I left Tex locked up there an' that crowd is kinda wild-like. If Brewster an' his pal should take the notion to stir 'em up—Blooey!"

"But, Dakota!" Callas' hands wavered out in a pleading gesture. "You were Mac's friend. He—he helped you out of trouble. He worked and worried to pull me out of this. Can't you—"

"Doggone!" Dakota actually jumped. "If that ain't—"

From the town below came a rattle of shots, then shrill yells that were like the hunting cries of a wolf pack. Dakota leaped to the door, looked down through a misty rain to a huddle of men milling round the rear of the jail.

Joe Callas and his troubles were wholly forgotten. Dakota ran out to White Foot and raced down the lane. Bitterly he reproached himself for leaving Plane locked in the jail. He should have got the prisoner out some way, instead of leaving that task to Scobel, who of course had failed because of the presence of Dorsey in the jail.

As he tore into the street near the hotel, Dakota sighted a detachment of the mob surging round the jail door. Then he observed with a depressing chill that the men were moving into the street, collecting in knots, talking excitedly. He was too late. Tex must have been killed in that attack.

Unnoticed in the tumult of waving arms and shouted talk, Dakota rode up, slid from his horse and elbowed through the crowd to the office. Inside, Baldy Scobel, his shiny dome red with blood from an ugly bruise, was winding a bandage round a man's arm. Another casualty was sitting on the floor nursing a blood-streaming leg.

"They got him, did they?" groaned Dakota.

"They didn't!" mumbled Scobel through a mouthful of bandage end. "He got out some way. Heluva jam this crazy gang got into. Come in from front an' back an' shot each other up. Aw, I got this bump goin' outa the kitchin windy."

Dakota's sigh of relief came from his heart. Tex was safe, not through breaking jail, but because of Baldy Scobel's aid.

Doc Beeber, with a wet slicker over his shoulders, bustled in and took charge of the wounded men. Dort Dorsey appeared and volleyed out questions. Scobel and Dakota sought the kitchen.

"So yuh got him out, Baldy," grinned Dakota. "Did he say where he'd wait for me?"

"He didn't have no time," sniffed the deputy. "I jest got him out by a whisker. I tol' him about my calico hoss—but I notice Tex didn' take him. Huh! That mob shore was lucky they didn't find Tex in that cell. He had his guns on."

"Better hussle up some early supper, Baldy." Dakota poured himself a cup of coffee from a boiling pot. "Say, did yuh see anything of them Callas bosses?"

"I did! Jest before the hell started here, Brewster come askin' for you. An' the feller I was doctorin' in there said that Champ Gillman was tellin' ev'rybody outside that he'd seen Tex Plane wearin' that blanket coat an' funny hat."

"I s'picioned they had a finger in that rotten pie," said Dakota. "Doggone! I wonder did Tex take—" He decided that his coffee was too hot and allowed it to cool while he hurried to the cell Plane had occupied.

The knife-slit sack containing the remainder of the fake rolls still lay under the bunk. Dakota pawed the grim evidence out and squatted on his heels to study it through squinting eyes.

"That Brewster sure will make a real try for this now," he mused. "Mebbe I better hide it—good."

He returned to the kitchen, but found his coffee still too hot, and the water bucket empty. He went out to the well and let down the wooden bucket, frowning up at the squeaking pulley.

"Ain't they no bottom?" he muttered as the rope end neared his hand. "Or is it dry? I'll find out," he chuckled and fumbled in his pocket. Shortly a splash rolled up from below. "Water there, all right," he sighed.

"Have you got a lizahd down theah?" drawled a soft voice at Dakota's shoulder. "If so, Ah might he'p you throw stones."

"Doggone it, Tex!" spluttered Dakota. "Yuh most made me lose this bucket. Yeh, com'on an' help."

"Did you find out anything, Dakota?"

"I found it—the whole answer. It's them two Callas bosses we want. They were after that fake so's they could hold their old man up."

"Both of 'em?"

"One or the other done that killin'. It don't make no matter which one."

The Texan glanced keenly at Dakota, and nodded. "Ah reckon yo'll soon be paying yo'ah debt to that sheriff."

"Yeah, I got good hopes now."

"Ah we ready to ride, Dakota?"

"Right with yuh, Tex."

Supper was forgotten. Plane saddled Calico while Dakota fetched White Foot from the street. When Scobel looked out to bellow his supper call to Dakota, it was to catch a glimpse of two men riding stirrup to stirrup up the alley.

CHAPTER XII

Craft against Trickery

BY the time the two man-hunters had reached the Callas gate, Dakota had related the surprising developments from his interview with the rancher. The Texan scowled over the account of Callas' close call at the hands of his traitorous bosses, and made dry comment.

"Ah reckon that ranchah has smelled quite some brimstone. What you think?"

"I think he's paid high interest on five thousand," agreed Dakota. Well, let's go talk to him."

The two hurried up to the house. Dakota pushed open the door, calling cheerily to the man sprawled across the desk.

"Here I am back, Joe. Me an' Tex—Doggone! It ain't Callas!"

"Ah see it ain't. It's Sonora, looking right discouraged ovah something."

As if roused by the sound of voices, the little Mexican lifted his face from the pillow of arms and desk, and stared wildly at the callers. The man's head was wound with a red-stained rag, and the bright crimson splotched his face and shirt.

"I was hope yo' would come, Tex," groaned Sonora. "That leetle gonman—he haf try to keel me."

"Buzz yo' mean?" Plane studied the Mexican through half-closed eyes. "Howcome?"

"He was scare of me," explained Sonora, apparently quite proud of that fact. "We was companeros one tam—down in Arizon'. He know I am faster than heem weeth the gon. So he ees scare. He smash me." The Mexican grimaced and caressed his head.

"Uh-huh." Dakota looked from Sonora's red-smeared face to the cold eyes of Tex Plane. "Kinda swells yuh up tuh have

him scared of yuh, don't it? Where is he?"

"Heem an' Geelman ees gone weeth Bull an' Porky—to where we was camp."

"Wheah's that?" asked Plane.

"Up een a shack of Callas—two-t'ree miles."

"They took the old man?" queried Dakota anxiously.

"They deed. They weel make heem pay—much money. Thees Buzz an' Geelman—they get ver' mad. Sometheeng he ees go wrong. They tell thees Callas they weel—what-yo'-call—put the screws on heem."

Plane continued to question the Mexican, but Dakota had heard and seen enough to give him food for suspicious thought. As an aid to concentration he secured his discarded stick from the fireplace and resumed his whittling. By taking Callas, Brewster was telling Dakota that the outlaws were still working on their scheme to gain a rich haul through the rancher.

Sonora now became the subject of the cowboy's pondering. Brewster was scared of him, so the Mexican had boasted. Dakota doubted that; he could not believe that Buzz Brewster would tangle in trouble with any man and leave him merely with a cracked head, and in possession of his guns. Besides, Dakota had observed that the smears on Sonora's face and shirt and on the bandage, instead of being the brown of drying blood, were a much too bright red.

So the Mexican was lying. He was not wounded, but was doing a bungling job of play-acting, with the make-up aid of Callas' red ink. Dakota reached out to snatch the ink-red bandage from Sonora's head, but drew back at Plane's quick gesture.

"Did you heah this, Dakota? Sonora says that Gillman is our killah."

"Gillman?" Dakota simulated wide-eyed surprise. "Is that right?" he demanded of the Mexican.

"Eet ees the trut'. I was hear them talking. But thees Buzz! Eef I could but keel heem! Yo' weel go, Tex—to get thees Geelman?"

"Ah reckon. You tell us how to find that shack and we'll go get them both."

"I weel show yo'. Me—I mus' haf the settle weeth thees Buzz. Eef yo' weel fin' me a horse—they haf take mine."

"Plenty hawsses hereabouts." Dakota looked across at Plane; messages of understanding passed. "What yuh think about takin' him, Tex?"

"He knows wheah them three lizahds weah camped. Ah nevah was up theah. Ah always met them in below that Devil's Claw place. Ah'd say, take him along."

"Yeah, his guns may come in handy—with us goin' up against them four."

"I mus' go weeth yo'!" Sonora's black eyes flashed. "I mus' keel thees Buzz! We weel treek heem—no?"

"Prob'ly no," grinned Dakota. "Well, we'll get a hawss for you. Able tuh walk?"

The Mexican limped from the desk, favoring a leg, finally clutching at his bandaged head. Dakota led out through the kitchen, with Tex Plane following close behind Sonora. At a hay rack in a corral Dakota secured a horse while the Texan hunted up a saddle. Soon the three men were mounted and riding hard through the drizzling rain.

Plane and Dakota had no need for open discussion of this affair. Both knew beyond a doubt that the treacherous little Mexican had been planted to lead them into a trap, yet they welcomed the chance to accompany him. Promptly Dakota released a little of the guile for which he was noted.

"Gosh, I forgot something!" The cowboy drew up his horse. "Tex, yuh know that sack we hid in— Say, I was goin' tuh give that tuh Baldy Scobel. Hadn't we better go back?"

"Ah reckon not," drawled Plane. "Nobody will find that stuff theah."

Dakota chuckled as he rode on. Tex had stepped right in at his cue. Sonora would reveal this bit of talk to Brewster, and the outlaws would hesitate to silence the two men who knew where that much-wanted sack was hidden. But—

"My gosh!" muttered Dakota. "I'm plumb loony! If that sweet pair knows

for sure that the sack won't show up, they'll be right satisfied. They'll clean up the witnesses—which happens tuh be Tex an' me—an' make Callas believe they got it. Yeah, I sure got tuh throw out some better bait."

Directed by Sonora, the party swung from the valley to climb a long spur toward timbered foothills, worked round to a grass-grown wagon track and followed it through a chain of high meadows. With the dusk of an early twilight the drizzle became a wind-whipped, drenching rain. Plane and Dakota donned their slickers, to the mumbled envy of Sonora, who had no such protection.

"Pret' near there," said the Mexican hopefully. "Me—I haf theenk of a treek. Yo' weel say that I am yo' priznor. See—I weel cover my gons weeth my coat. Then—when we get een close—we weel go for them."

"That is right good," drawled Plane. "Ah didn't think you had such brains, Sonora. But theah is a knothole in your trick. That Brewstah would tumble right off—unless we got you tied up."

"Tied up? No-no!" Sonor slashed the air with protesting gestures. "That would not do. My gons—I could not fight—I could not keel thees Buzz."

"We'll fix that." Dakota was enjoying the Mexican's distress. "Soon as we get right in amongst 'em, we'll cut yuh loose. That is, if we need your guns."

"Shure," was Plane's donation to this bit of teamwork. "We'll tell 'em we made you show us the way. And say we are hunting Mistah Callas."

Sonora found it necessary to revert to his native tongue, wailing excitedly and at length. In a dozen ways he let the cat clear out of the bag, but his trail-mates appeared not to notice these lapses. Dakota bound the Mexican's arms behind his back with a lariat and secured the rope end to his own saddle horn.

"Don't yuh worry now, Mex. They won't start anything—not right at first. I'm guessin' yuh don't know jest what them two Callas bosses are up to, do yuh?"

Sonora's mumbled reply was vague. Dakota reasoned that Gillman and Brewster would not be so generous as to reveal their valuable secret, and thus let themselves in for a split with Bull Stutt, Porky and Sonora. In which case it wouldn't be a bad safety measure to put out a little private bait for Sonora and his two mates.

"Well, I'll tell yuh about that, Mex. That nose-busted Gillman got a sack of money outa the express office safe, but he passed right over the big wad. Oh, that was a lulu—the sack he missed. How many thousand in that, Tex?"

"Must 'a' been fifty thousand," replied Plane promptly. "Theah were some several packages of papah money—with ten thousand mahked on each of them. A right nice haul—that lad missed."

"So yuh see," went on Dakota, encouraged by the crafty glitter in Sonora's dark eyes, "them lads lost out on that, but they found out later how they'd been fooled. So they'll be awful tickled when you blurt out quick that Tex an' me found that pile of money, an' hid it for ourselves. That will square yuh with Buzz—an' I reckon Bull Stutt will be some interested."

Sonora struck at that like a hungry trout at a fly. This being a bound prisoner was an unforeseen predicament, hence, the Mexican would jump at any logical argument to postpone gun trouble until he gained his release.

DUSK had deepened to full darkness when Dakota glimpsed the flicker of a campfire ahead. Shortly he sighted the fire-lighted outlines of a log cabin standing in a glade. Several horses grazed in the meadow below. A single slicker-clad man stood by the fire.

"'Bout time for you to sing out, Mex," warned Dakota, unbuttoning his slicker. "They've heard us comin' an' are layin' for us in the dark. Hussle now, 'fore they start shootin' promiscuss."

"Buzz! Geelman!" yelled Sonora. "Don' shoot! I haf' breeng the hombres who know where ees that sack."

"I see you've brung suthin'," came Brewster's cold retort from just inside the cabin door. "Keep comin'."

Dakota and the Texan, crowded close

on either side of the bound Mexican, rode coolly into the firelight. Each was fully aware that sudden death lurked just within that dark doorway and the single sashless window on the end. Yet they betrayed no uneasiness as they drew up in the light, just back of a big log that had been dragged in for firewood.

"Hello, Tex." Porky straightened from poking pitch pine sticks into the fire. "I see you fellers made it all right."

This revelation that the party had been expected was carefully overlooked by Plane and Dakota.

"Hell!" spluttered Gillman from his ambush point inside the end window. "Sonora's let them two tie him up."

"You understand, Buzz?" insinuated the Mexican anxiously. "Thees hombres haf tell me about that beeg money."

"Big money?" Brewster appeared puzzled.

"Si—yes! They haf got eet. Yo' weel make them—"

"They jest opened up nice to ya, didn't they?" sneered Brewster. "Well, you fellers can't pump me full of wind like ya done this greaser. What ya want?"

"We come tuh have a talk," replied Dakota. "We made this Mex show us the road up here. We got a warrant for Joe Callas—an' we're askin' yuh to let us have him."

"Warrant for what?" queried Brewster in worried tones.

"Murder. Dan McCarroll an' that Madden convict. We got the goods on Callas."

Brewster must have thought this too good to be true, for he shifted restlessly in the shadowed doorway and fingered his hawk nose. Porky grasped this opportunity to slip past Brewster to the security of the cabin.

"What you waitin' for, Buzz?" snorted Gillman. "If they think Callas done that—"

"Go easy, y' rannies!" bellowed Bull Stutt from the cabin darkness. "What's that you was sayin', Sonora?"

"Shut up in there!" snapped Brewster. "I'm runnin' this. So you want Callas. You willin' to trade that sack for him?"

"We might," returned Dakota, wondering why Brewster did not see the significance of that sack being hidden. "But what for yuh so almighty anxious tuh get that sack? Nothin' in it but some pieces of iron done up in paper."

Sonora jumped as if he had been bit by a hornet, stared with his jaw sagging, finally let out a howl.

"So yo' hombres lie to me. Buzz! Yo' say eet ees much gol' een thees sack. Why— Queek, Buzz!" he whinned. "Get me loose. I haf treek them here like yo' say. Don' shoot, Geelman!"

"He won't, yuh poor ninny," chuckled Dakota. "Yuh're takin' too dang' much credit for gettin' us here."

"Drop yore guns, you two!" ordered Brewster sharply. "Let 'em slide down. Kin you see 'em outa that windy, Champ?"

"I see 'um," replied Gillman, and wiggled his rifle barrel into the window opening. "If they make a funny move I'll bore 'em both."

"Yo' wait!" wailed Sonora. "Buzz—get me loose from here!"

"Hold yore hosses, greaser," sneered Brewster, stepping out into the rain. "I thought you had some sense, but you're a plumb idjot. You, Dakoty! Ease yore hardware down."

"Not this evenin', Buzz," drawled the cowboy. "Hold on, Mex," he cautioned Sonora, who was trying to roll off his horse. We'll all get down."

Deliberately Dakota flipped a turn of the rope that led to Sonora round his right wrist and slipped to the ground facing Brewster. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Plane dismounting.

"Now yuh can drop off, Mex. No, yuh better come down on this side."

Sonora threw his left leg over, and with Dakota steadying him, he slid to the ground. The horses promptly ambled off into the darkness. Plane had moved over until he stood beside the Mexican. Dakota worked his human lead-rope round his forearm and pressed close against Sonora's left side, glancing down to make sure that his flapping slicker did not cover his guns.

"If you think that greaser helps yore chances any," snorted Brewster, "you're bettin' on the wrong card."

Sonora babbled a whining plea to Brewster, received a curse in reply and tried to duck behind the fireside log. Dakota jerked him upright with the rope.

"Don't let him get your goat, Mex. Jest a minnit now an' we'll turn yuh loose, an' watch yuh make good on your big talk. Now, Buzz, yuh got Callas in that shack?"

"We got 'im!" came from Gillman. "Got him all tied nice where airy shootin'll git him easy."

"Shut up, Champ!" snarled Brewster. "Now, you fellers. We got ya! We got ol' Callas, too, if that means anything. We've got in purty deep, so you can figger how bad we want that sack. Here's my proposition. A even trade. One of you go down with me an' git that sack. After we git that, an' do our piece of bizness with Joe, the three of you kin ride."

That offer was a joke to Dakota. These outlaws could not afford to be so generous as to leave three witnesses against them. Of course they had no intention of making that blunder.

"We might do that." Dakota appeared to consider. "But we come tuh get Callas."

"Like hell ya did!" snorted Brewster. "You ain't foolin' ol' Buzz. No more argyin' now. Stick yore hands up—both of ya!"

"Ah swore off on that," retorted Tex Plane. "Two times lately Ah've found mahse'f without mah guns. Reckon you two can take 'em?"

"Git outa line, Buzz!" howled Gillman. "I'll shoot their legs up. Then we kin—"

"Then yuh'll lay off tuh bury Mister Brewster," put in Dakota. "Wham away."

Brewster must have been troubled over Dakota's suggestion, for he started backing toward the cabin door. The cowboy was about to put a stop to that move when Gillman burst out:

"Aw, you goin' to let 'em talk ya silly, Buzz?" A log-thick leg came through the window, to be followed by Gillman's sliding bulk. "What's the diff—long as they hid that stuff? We've got Joe cinched—"

"Sure!" Brewster finally had grasped the point that had worried Dakota. "Of course! We kin easy make Joe—why, you damn' fool!" he raged, now observing Gillman's advance, "Git back in there!"

"Please don't!" warned Dakota. "That's all we was wantin'—tuh get yuh both out here. So, Tex?"

"Dead right, Dakota," purred the Texan. "One of 'em killed mah brothah. No mattah which one."

"No matter," agreed Dakota.

Brewster and Gillman could not fail now to understand the desperate purpose of the two men they had thought to trick. They had come with Sonora on the long chance of getting the man who had killed their friends. Their opportunity was here and they would grasp it, well knowing that only a miracle could save them from the guns of Bull Stutt and Porky inside.

CHAPTER XIII

Dakota Pays His Debt

DURING the tense instant while Brewster was swearing at his mate for coming into the open, and Gillman was restlessly betraying regret over leaving the cabin, Dakota was sizing the layout. Brewster stood directly in front of the cowboy and in line with the black hole of the cabin door. Plane was facing Gillman. In dealing this hand fate had stacked the cards against Dakota, for, with arms still stiff from his wounds, he had drawn as antagonist the dangerously speedy Brewster. Tex Plane, who was reputed to be lightning on the draw, faced an easy mark in the fist-fighting Gillman.

Yet Dakota did not hesitate; he had often been on the short end. He edged sidewise back of the log, pressing closer against Sonora, at the same time slowly turning his right side toward Brewster. He was quite reconciled to a trick draw that might give him a slight advantage.

"You fellers inside!" bawled the now panicky Gillman. "Why don't ya git 'em?"

"They'd have to shoot right quick to save you fellahs," said Tex Plane. "And you'd maybe stop theah bullets. Ah you ready, Dakota?"

The cowboy had no opportunity to re-

ply. Sonora, seeing himself riddled by the bullets of his late friends, snarled like a trapped coyote, and tried to drop back of the log. His action hurried Dakota, who was working to get his body-screened left hand upon his gun butt before he made the fight-starting move with his right.

Even at that Tex Plane fired the first shot, beating Gillman's rifle by a safe margin. Brewster whipped out both his guns. Knowing that he never could get his weapon out in time, Dakota fired through the holster.

Brewster missed with two almost simultaneous shots; also, Dakota's shot went wild. But those misses could be chalked up against Sonora, who had abandoned his hope of finding protection back of the log and had plunged straight for the cabin door. The rope, loosely wrapped round Dakota's arm, jerked the cowboy to the ground before it pulled away.

Dakota found himself lying on his face back of the log, the cold water of a muddy pool seeping to his stomach. He investigated cautiously by twisting his head. Plane had disappeared from where he had stood, but the dim firelight flickered on a sprawling form just beyond. For an instant Dakota was knife-cut by the fear that the motionless figure was Tex Plane. Then the fire flared up and he saw that it was Gillman, face down in the mud, the rifle still clutched in an outflung hand.

From the cabin came the rage-thick voice of Buzz Brewster profanely berating someone for a "crazy fool." Dakota surmised that Sonora must be the victim of that tirade. Hopefully he reasoned that the remaining four outlaws must all be inside.

"We've got 'em!" It struck Dakota that maybe he would ride the range again, a prospect that for a time had not looked promising. "One door an' one window—an' two of us tuh watch 'em."

His thought thus drawn to his companion, Dakota began searching the shadows for Plane, but he could see nothing in the utter blackness outside the rapidly diminishing circle of firelight. The cowboy wriggled forward until he could peek at the cabin round the end of the log. The fire had died until its light revealed only the slightly darker rectangle of the doorway.

"We've got 'em!" Dakota repeated his happy conclusion with still more confidence. "As the fire goes out I can sneak closer. I'll be able tuh watch the door an' Tex will see they don't crawl outa that window. Then come mornin'—My gosh! Have we got tuh lay out here in the cold wet all night?"

That prospect was distressing. At once Dakota sought action that would at least keep him from chilling. Deciding that he should get in contact with Tex before the light wholly died and thus made necessary his closer approach to the door, he crawled back from the log.

After retreating ten feet Dakota looked back; he was unable to distinguish anything of the cabin. He rose then and walked to the right, into the gloom that he was sure concealed the Texan.

A shot lighted the cabin door, then several more. Dakota guessed that the firing was a ruse to draw a locating return from those outside, and resisted the temptation to try some flash shooting. Realizing that for the moment he was leaving the door unguarded, Dakota hurried, and bumped into a tree.

"Is that you, Dakota?" came Plane's soft drawl.

"Yeah. How yuh fixed, Tex?"

"Got me a good rock, but Ah don't need it. They cain't see a thing. Well, what's the system now?"

"Looks like they ain't much tuh do till daylight." Dakota crawled to the Texan's side and hunkered down in a puddle. "But doggone! It's goin' tuh be a awful wait!"

"It don't look like much else to do," sighed Plane. "Did you nip that Brewstah a-tall?"

"Nip, hell!" spluttered Dakota disgustedly "I didn't even hit the landscape. That Mex jerked me sprawlin' with the rope. I got a lot tuh be thankful for at that. Brewster had me beat a mile. Too bad you wasn't where I was Tex."

"That greasah got us both foozled,"

sniffed the Texan. "If he hadn't went goofy Ah could have got Brewstah too. As it was, all Ah could do was run. And Ah sho' done that thing."

"Well, we got 'em whittled down to four, Tex. If it wasn't for old Callas bein' in there, we could cut the odds down some more mebbe. I usta be pretty good at snap-shootin' flashes."

"Yeh, him being in theah makes it bad," agreed Plane. "When them fo' come out in the mo'nin' they'll stick that old ranchah up in front of 'em."

"That's right. Still, Brewster may figger how he'd look at that if he was in our place. So mebbe he won't bet high on Callas bein' airy protection. But my gosh, Tex! All night in this wet! I'm gettin' stiff all over—an' it's only evenin'. Eight-ten hours layin' here in ice water—an' without a smoke till it's all over. Aw, shoot, Tex! Let's do something."

Plane shifted in the squashy mud, then he chuckled. "Ah reckon you have an idee, Dakota. From what Ah've heahd of you Ah didn't think you was a waitah. What you got tickling your brain?"

"It's mebbe a long chance, but shucks! Yuh know where's that snortin' Calico hawss yuh rode?"

"Ah heahd him eating ovah beyond. What you want him fo'?"

Dakota explained. The Texan drew breath for remonstrance, used it to suggest that he take the star part in Dakota's daredevil play. But the cowboy had an argument against that.

"Nope. This little stunt needs a man out here what's got two good hands. I don't reckon I could ketch that hawss. But if I have airy shootin' tuh do it won't need tuh be fancy. Yuh savvy Tex?"

"Ah'll covah you," promised Plane. "Dakota, you are a man aftah mah own heaht. Ah hope we have a chance latah to have a good talk."

"We will. You bet! To-morrow we'll hit out for Wardance. I got a rancher friend there whose wife sure can cook."

Plane sighed softly. Dakota grinned wryly into the darkness. Both knew that there was considerable doubt as to where they would be to-morrow.

"Well, here goes, Tex."

"Good luck, Dakota."

Plane started feeling his way toward the sounds of a grazing horse. Dakota, crawling on hands and knees in the sticky gumbo, finally reached the corner of the cabin. He listened then to the mumble of voices inside, but found slight interest in Bull Stutt's suggestion that "we git goin' outa here." He groped along the log wall toward the door, halting as his foot touched an obstruction. It was a saddle, he discovered, that had been thrown in the dry under the eaves. Dakota was feeling for a spot to place his foot when his hand encountered a gunny sack tied back of the cantle. His prodding fingers investigated.

"That money," he murmured. "The real stuff. Well, it's as safe here as anywhere."

Crouching beside the door, Dakota reached out to locate the log sill and the stone step below. He straightened then, to stand poised, tensely waiting.

Suddenly a horse snorted, hammered the ground with dancing hoofs, tore crashing away through the brush. A six-gun spat a series of blasts beyond the cabin.

"Git him, Mex!" Brewster snapped that order from just inside the door. "One of 'em's tearin' out. Blaze 'em up.

Guns roared in the cabin. Stumbling steps left the door. Dakota drew a deep breath, clutched the jamb and eased one foot to the sill. Another step and he was inside, hugging the wall beside the door.

A gun blared outside, to be followed instantly by a shot from the window.

"They ees hide behind that beeg rock!" wailed Sonora. "Thees window ees bad —" Another report from the outer darkness drew scrambling sounds as the Mexican dropped below the opening.

"Git back to the door where I was, ya yella greaser!" growled Brewster. "One of 'em's coverin' his pard's getaway."

Dakota had already started to slip along the wall toward the end opposite the window. He heard the soft tread of the Mexican crossing to the door. A shot from outside drove a bullet crackling through the shake roof.

"He won't do much damage that way," sniffed Brewster. "Aw, I tol' ya they wouldn't give a damn for the ol' man. Didya tie Joe good, Porky?" An affirmative grunt came from just ahead of Dakota.

"Jest tryin' to throw a scare," suggested the cow bellow of Bull Stutt. "Tex Plane wouldn't miss a gun flash a mile. I've seen him shoot candles out in the dark."

THERE followed a discussion near the window, but Dakota was getting too warm in his hide-and-seek game to give any heed to it. His softly feeling hand had found the boots of a man sitting at the end of a stone fireplace. At first the cowboy thought the man must be Callas, but another touching of the outthrust boots told him that the rough cowhides were not the natty footgear of the rancher. By listening to the talk, Dakota located Brewster and Stutt at the window and Sonora near the door. So this must be Porky, lazily allowing his mates to do the worrying.

Shots were still booming from the darkness outside, but now they were drawing no return from Brewster, who plainly was becoming suspicious of a trick. Dakota heard the outlaw leader return to the door and mumble to Sonora:

"Take it easy. Mebbe they wasn't tryin' to beat it. All that hellabaloo might be a play for one of 'em to git up ag'in the shack. They couldn't burn us out in this wet though."

Dakota, anxious now to locate Callas, advanced with slow caution into the room. Halted by the pole leg of a table, he felt upward and along the puncheon edge until his hand encountered several loops of a rope wound under the table top.

"Porky!" yelped Brewster. "Where's that pitch you carried in? I'm goin' to throw a light outside."

"Under the table," muttered Porky. "Aw, what's the use fussin'. They can't do nuthin'. An' come daylight—"

"Daylight!" growled Brewster. "If we're still here when it comes light—we're here for a right long time. We gotta do something."

Dakota felt a hand brush his knee as Brewster pawed under the table for the sticks of pitch pine. The cowboy ducked back just as a groaning exclamation came from the table.

"Shut up!" rasped Brewster. "You ain't half dead yet, Joe. If you hadn't pulled that trick on us— Dammit! Mebbe now you kin help us a little. Yell out to them fellers, Joe. Start a dicker with 'em."

From his bed on the table, Callas called Tex and Dakota several times by name, then gave a few general shouts, but received no reply. "They've gone," he said quite coolly. "One of 'em anyway—to get a posse."

Brewster snorted; apparently he saw little hope that his two enemies had separated in that manner. Dakota could hear the outlaw swearing over the dullness of his knife as he whittled at a stick.

Troubled over what would happen when Brewster lighted that pitch pine, Dakota groped hastily across the table top for the rancher's face and pressed his fingers upon Callas lips. He felt a start of surprise, but he was already whispering in the prisoner's ear, thankful for the slight noise of Brewster's whittling.

"When I get these ropes cut, slip off easy on that right side. Crawl straight an' yuh'll hit the door. Watch your chance—an' make it through."

Callas' head jerked with an understanding nod. Dakota began cutting rope loops with his slender knife blade. Just as the last bond wes severed a ripping burst of shots crashed outside.

"Good old Tex!" Dakota crept back to the stone fireplace. "He's sure savin' my skin every minnit."

Brewster had left his kindling job to investigate through the window. He tried a few shots, drew a reply each time, swore savagely as bullets splintered the shakes overhead.

"Damn' if I like that!" muttered the outlaw. "They ain't tryin' to shoot. They're up to suthin'."

Just at that instant Dakota certainly was up to something. He was starting the clean-up job that had been his purpose in entering that dark room. It was ticklish work, locating Porky's head without dis-

turbing the fat outlaw's lazy resting, but Dakota was lucky. His gun barrel dropped with just the proper amount of push behind it.

"What's that?" Bull Stutt had heard the thud of Dakota's blow. "Porky, what ya up to?"

Porky, limp across Dakota's arm, was quite unable to reply. Luckily for the cowboy, a startled outburst from Sonora beside the door drew all attention.

"Sometheeng!" squealed the Mexican. "I feel heem—right here. Eet was like a dead man— Come queek, Buzz!"

Crouched beside the unconscious Porky, Dakota listened anxiously while Brewster investigated. He breathed easier when nothing was found wrong. Sure that Callas was now outside, Dakota decided to put Porky in his place.

It proved to be a slow and strenuous job to transfer the awkwardly-limp body of the fat outlaw to the table, but Dakota made it. And just in time, for Sonora, hearing something of that movement, was having another attack of nerves.

"Somebody ees een here, Buzz! Eet ees one of them!"

"We'll see about that!" Some such reason for that aimless shooting outside must have struck Brewster. "Le's git up by the windy, fellers. Com'on, Porky!"

Dakota understood the outlaw's purpose. He would collect the four members of his party at the window end of the cabin, and then take measures to determine if an intruder were inside.

"Here goes nothin'," thought Dakota, and groping along the wall toward the window.

The cowboy could hear Sonora noisily hurrying down the other side. Brewster had returned to the window. Dakota found himself wedged in between Stutt on his right and Brewster on his left. Sonora, muttering in Spanish, was on the other side of Brewster.

"All here?" whispered the leader. "You there, Porky?"

Dakota grunted, realizing that Brewster was mistaking him for Bull Stutt and thinking Porky to be on the end.

"Keep from front of that windy," warned Brewster. "All together now. Burn the damn' place up!"

The room was lighted by the flares of blazing guns. Dakota, knowing that in a moment cartridges would be at a premium, did not fire. The flashes cut the darkness for an instant, revealing to Dakota the still senseless Porky on the table, revealing to the outlaws no other human form.

"See there, ya jumpy greaser!" sneered Brewster. "Nobody—"

"But them boots!" Bull Stutt's slow mind was working. "That ain't Callas on—"

Dakota had known that this would be his last chance to drop one more of his enemies by the gun-slugging method. He had lifted his left hand gun with the intention of trying for the dangerous Brewster first, but at Stutt's outburst the cowboy slashed out to the right. His blow connected, but Stutt's wild bellow brought the sad news that he probably had landed only on a shoulder.

"Right here—in 'mongst us!" howled Stutt, and plunged crashing into the fireplace. "That's Porky on the table!"

The cowboy struck out at where Brewster had been standing, but the wily outlaw had moved. However, Dakota's swinging gun met a yielding form, and drew a grunt of pain from a man sliding through the window.

"Tex!" Dakota had no time for apology. "All clear. Tear into 'em!"

The Texan made no reply, made no inquiry, made no unnecessary move. Even before his feet reached the floor at Dakota's side both his guns were pouring lines of flame into darkness. Dakota, too, had gone into action, a thumb-fanned gun in each hand hurling lead in the direction Stutt had retreated.

The three outlaws must have realized that in their guns lay their only hope of escape. Sonora and Brewster crouched in the corner and Bull Stutt hugged the fireplace; none of them was ten feet from the door, but who could hope to pass through ten feet of leaden hail from the guns of Tex Plane and the great Dakota?

Crashes shook the cabin like blasts. Continuous lightning flashes illumined the

room. Suffocating smoke pressed down upon the fighting men.

It was a battle of seconds, for life could not last long in that sweep of lead. One of Plane's guns went silent. Dakota felt his left leg go suddenly numb. Instinctively his weight shifted to the other leg. A flash lighted for an instant the lumpy shoulder of Bull Stutt projecting beyond the fireplace. Dakota fired, and a gun clattered to the floor.

As Dakota whirled, rapid metallic sounds told him that the Texan's remaining weapon was empty. The cowboy wondered dully if he had another shot. The blaze of Sonora's gun revealed the snarling hawk-face of Buzz Brewster, cocked sidewise in listening as he raised his weapon to fire at Plane's futile clicking. Dakota flipped his hammer and surged with relief at the booming crash.

Into the dead silence that followed rose the screaming cries of Sonora.

"No-no-no! No more—plez—no more!"

"Ah guess that's all," sighed Tex Plane. "You got Brewstah—daid centah. And thus saved one po' lad from Texas. Ah you hit bad, pahd?"

"A nip in the leg. How yuh fixed?"

"Mah ahm is out, but othahwise Ah feel right good. Ouah debt is paid, Dakota."

"Yuh're right," murmured the cowboy, and found need to lean against the wall. "But it wasn't this battle that squared my account. I found the way—"

"Dakota!" called a breaking voice from the door. "You boys—alive?"

"Bet your life, Joe! Got a dry match? They's some pitch right by the door."

A match flared in the inky blackness. Pitch pine spluttered. A flaming torch crossed to the fireplace. Dakota felt himself settling over against Tex Plane. A steadying arm came round him.

"Ah reckon—we bettah—set down."

"Seems like," sighed Dakota.

Flames from the fireplace lighted the room. Calling anxious queries, Callas headed toward the two men sitting under the window. Dakota squinted across the room.

"Porky had a miracle work on him, Tex. He's wigglin'."

"And Ah see Bull Stutt is fah from daid."

"An' the Mex is only scared. Say—" Dakota broke off to wave the worried rancher back. "Joe, see can yuh find some dry tobaccy in them fellers' pockets. Now, Tex—I don't like the idee of these three scalawags yuh brought in here talkin' tuh that district attorney. What say?"

"Ah didn't think theah was anothah man as easy as Ah am," was Plane's soft reply. "You are right, Dakota. Not that Ah feah theah talk—but Ah got them into this."

"Then we're set." Dakota accepted makings from Callas and began rolling a cigarette. "Joe, think yuh can find a hawss an' go tell Baldy about this?"

"But these—" Callas looked uneasily at the outlaws. "I'll have to tie them up."

"No need tuh tie up dead men," sniffed Dakota, passing the cigarette to Plane. "That's all was in this scrap—Gillman an' Brewster—an' they're dead."

"That's right, Mistah Callas. You maybe dreamed theah was some mo' stinkahs in heah—but theah wasn't."

"You—you mean you're going to let them go?" said Callas blankly.

"Yeh, an' we're askin' you not tuh mention that they was anyways connected. Yuh see, we're patternin' after you an' Mac—an' sendin' these three no-good devils out on a fresh trail. Say, that stolen gold is jest outside the door. Yuh better take it down with yuh, Joe."

Understanding came then to Joe Callas. "I was afraid you wouldn't—"

"Yuh had no call tuh worry," murmured Dakota. "Not with you givin' me this big chance. Yeah, all your worry is deep buried in that jail well. An' to-morrow mebbe yuh'll take that sack tuh Red Plains. So we're wishin' yuh luck at election, Joe. I'll see can't I dig up a vote for you."

"I—I don't know what—to say—" Emotion choked off the rancher's speech.

"I'm the one that ought to be thankin' you," said Dakota softly. "For givin' me this chance tuh settle my big debt tuh Dan McCarroll. Yuh see, Joe, I'm payin' that debt—in exactly the way Mac would like—to Mac's best friend."

UTAH FOLLOWS THROUGH

By Nels Leroy Jorgensen

Rio Taylor faces death on the trail of a gun-fanged desert snake.

I

"DEAD! Plumb complete!"

Rio Taylor straightened up slowly from over Shorty's lifeless figure and surveyed the quiet scene. His gray eyes were hard; there was about them a calculating restlessness. They were harder, perhaps, because of the instant knowledge that he would be blamed for Shorty's sudden demise.

Above was the trail, empty and deserted of any life, and as dry and hot as the desert out of which it wandered. Up there was a riderless horse that seemed incapable of leaving the spot; and down here, hidden by cottonwoods and a clump of alder, his skull crushed in like an eggshell, lay Shorty Bowers of the Utah C.

The fact that Shorty had been drinking with him until a late hour the night before seemed to weigh with Rio not at all. Lean and hard, cold-eyed and soft-voiced, Rio accepted the fact of sudden death as years on the range had taught him. He was more engrossed with what affected him personally.

They would remember, back in town, that Shorty had received a lot of money the day before. They would recall that he and Shorty had drunk often and long on the strength of it. They would remember that Shorty had set off alone for his home ranch with money on him—and here he was at the bottom of the gully with his skull crushed in and the money gone!

Rio surveyed the scene calmly once more. He rolled a cigarette and went over every inch of ground. Once, his observations caused a grunt, and he looked back toward where Shorty's riderless horse still waited. That was all.

Then, later, he said. "Well, I reckon we might as well see what the boys 'll have t' say about it."

He got on his own mount, a tall, rangy buckskin that seemed well suited to its lean, sun-bitten rider, and scrambling up the stony embankment of the gully, headed back toward the little town at the edge of the desert which had been christened Flagstop—because it had hoped to be and wasn't.

II

THE sheriff was absent. In the door of his office lounged a sleepy figure at one with the somnolent laziness of the long main street of Flagstop.

"Howdy, Rio."

Speechless Sam, deputy on frequent occasions, allowed his flapping sombrero to come up a trifle from over his eyes while he regarded the arrival thoughtfully. Rio's appearance, however, did not cause him to remove his tilted chair from across the office doorway, nor to pull down his feet from where they were caught on the edge of a battered desk just inside.

"'Lo, Speechless. Any news?"

"Nothin' much. Utah Larimar's in town, huntin' up his hand, Shorty Bowers. Seen 'im?"

"Yeah." Rio dropped casually from his mount and rolled a cigarette carefully. The gray eyes in his lean, angular face were interested apparently in that one operation alone. "He's dead."

The chair came down with a crash. But Rio's tongue slid expertly across the length of a cigarette paper before he nodded confirmation.

"Plumb dead. Fell off'n his hoss, looks like, out by the gully afore the creek. I jest found him an' was ridin' in to tell Sheriff Bo's about it."

"Dead?" Speechless persisted. "Hell, he had plenty *dinero* on 'm, Rio—plenty. An' wasn't yuh drinkin' together most o' the night?"

"Yeah. Hate t' drink with a feller an' have him take it that hard 'cause he can't put yuh under the table. It jest ain't sociable." Rio considered. "I think, before we started celebratin' the fact itself, Rio told me what it was about. Seems like some long-lost sister died out East some'res and left Shorty some insurance. He cashed an express draft yesterday. Reckon it was plenty of money. I always did say it was wise not to change yore name out here unless it was plumb necessary. Now if Shorty hadn't 'a' kept his real name—"

"He wouldn't be dead!"

"Maybe. Who said he was killed for that money?"

Speechless swore. "Rio, d'yuh know what this means?"

"Yeah. Shorty's dead."

"Know Utah's in town t' find him? Know how Utah follers through when he's settlin' up? Know what the boys'll think? Hell! Did he have the money on him when yuh found him?"

"Not even the wallet they give him. A nice wallet, too—sorta an incentive, like, t' save money." Rio looked at the deputy. His eyes were clear; and yet, when he stared, there was something cold and bleak behind their grayness.

Speechless gulped back what was on his lips for utterance. "Hell!" he said again. "Wish the boss was here."

"Yeah. So do I."

"Utah's gonna be fierce mad."

"Yeah. I reckoned so. Utah an' me've been friends for a long time. Reckon I'll slope along. Maybe we can work together. The thing is, though, they ain't nobody t' blame I s'pose, if Shorty can't hold his likker."

"Can't hold—rattlesnakes!" Speechless burst out scornfully. "Shorty Bowers 's been holdin' bad likker for so long that he'd 'a' blowed up if a match got near him. Hell, it wasn't liquor that ever made Shorty tumble down there."

"No?" Rio looked up again and the deputy's angry gaze faltered. "Jest what yuh figgerin' it mighta been, Speechless?"

"Money's gone, ain't it?"

"Plenty."

"Then—" Speechless did not finish. He hitched up his belt and turned helplessly into the office. "Hell! Every time I'm left on this job somethin' happens. Why couldn't Shorty 'a' fell at some other place on that trail—where the ground was soft?"

"Jest what I was thinkin'," Rio agreed complacently. "Danged mis-thoughtful of him, all the way around. Reckon I'll slope down t' see Utah."

III

RIO made for the Red Flag bar, which was located in the exact center of Flagstop's main street. It had the longest hitching-rack of the street and it

also boasted a watering trough that spoke volumes for its prosperity. By mutual consent, the Red Flag was the meeting place of everyone coming to town.

There was the usual afternoon crowd inside the cool, wide barroom. The day was not out of the ordinary. The few men lined at the bar were casual hangers-on, and a few more sat about a faro table in the shadows farther back.

Rio hesitated and then made out his man. Utah Larimer stood slumped with his back against the bar and his elbows resting on the rail, rolling a cigarette; but it was plain that his mind was not on that operation.

He was a tall man—almost as tall as Rio Taylor, but younger, with black, straight hair, swarthy features, and keen black eyes that were piercing and straight. They brightened at sight of Rio, but Utah did not move. Next to him, Wells, the wiry little foreman of the outfit, straightened hopefully.

"Jest the man I was aimin' t' run across, Rio," the rancher said. "Seen anything o' Shorty Bowers? He ain't come home."

"Yeuh, I seen him." Rio was conscious that his acknowledgement made him the center of every eye. The bartender stopped wiping at the mahogany to listen.

"Where? Where is he—drunk?"

"Nope. Dead. He's at the bottom o' that gully out on the trail t' the Utah C. Funny yuh didn't see his hoss when yuh rode in. That's how I found him."

"Dead!" Utah was erect now. "Dead, yuh say, Rio?"

"Plenty dead," Rio agreed. "Found him there myself. I was ridin' out t' see yuh, Utah."

Inside the Red Flag there was a dead, ominous silence which Rio appeared to notice not in the least. Utah was staring at him from under dark, frowning brows.

"The boys tell me yuh was drinkin' with 'im most o' the night last night. Did he leave here all right?" he demanded.

Rio faced him. They had been friends for a long time, these two, but Rio had his own code of personal relationships.

"Yuh askin' me questions, Utah?" he returned softly. "I was figgerin' to tell yuh where Shorty is. The rest maybe 'll wait for the sheriff."

"It's a time t' ask questions, Rio—an' Sheriff Bob's away right now," came back Utah's grave reply. "Shorty had money on him. I don't reckon yuh found that, did yuh?"

Rio shook his head. "Nope. Looked for it, too. He had it when he left here. But then—" For the first time, Rio's eyes took cognizance of other people in the barroom. "I wasn't the only one drinkin' with Shorty last night, come t' think on it."

"No, but yuh was the last one!" came in a sudden snarl.

Rio whirled; but even the swiftness of that catlike movement was masked beneath an outward indolence. He saw a dark, handsome figure all in black—black-shirted, black-hatted, with a black string tie—rise from behind a wall table nearby where a Canfield layout was spread.

"Oh, hullo, Keno," Rio greeted him. "Howdy. Yeuh, I reckon I was thinkin' o' you. You an' Shorty was reachin' around the bar while I was playin' cards there a while, wasn't yuh?"

"Yeah." Keno moved toward the tense group of men. "An' then I went upstairs. I'm livin' here. Pete—" He turned on the bartender savagely. "I reckon yuh saw me turn in last night, didn't yuh?"

Pete nodded vociferously. "Shore did, Keno."

Rio blinked with mild surprise. "What's all the alibi for, Keno? Somebody been talkin' wild? Yuh shouldn't oughta get an alibi all fixed up every time yuh have a drink with a feller, *amigo*."

"No—but Shorty Bowers was killed—for his money, an' everybody here figgers that, I reckon. I want t' make it plumb clear where I was when it musta happened!"

"Shorty fell from his hoss—at least, it looks that way," Rio said calmly. "I wouldn't go thinkin' about accusin' anybody yet, Keno."

"Shorty never could get drunk enough in his whole life to fall off his horse," came Utah's steady voice at Rio's elbow.

"He couldn't get that way. Besides, he was ridin' Goldie, and Goldie knows how to take care of him."

"Meanin'?"

Hooking one elbow on the bar, Rio let a thumb drop in his belt. He looked languid, careless; but in his eyes was that bleak, dangerous light.

Utah did not need it, however, for a warning. Utah knew Rio Taylor; he had known him for a long time. The two understood and respected one another thoroughly. Side by side they had blazed their way through dangerous scenes in a recent cattle war, when Rio had gone for a short time into the Utah C payroll; and a deep friendship had been cemented.

But Utah, son of one of the first ranchers in the valley was known all over the state for his relentless sense of justice. Shorty had been an employee and something had happened—something not on the cards. Everyone knew that Utah would not rest until justice was done.

"Meanin' somebody was after Shorty's wad, I reckon," he said between his teeth. "We all know yuh, Rio, an' most of us like yuh; but nobody ever did figger how yuh manage to get along without workin' much. Yo're stayin' on and answerin' some questions—that's all."

"I'm answerin' the sheriff's questions only—as long as yuh feel that way!" Rio straightened, a lean, cold six feet.

"Hold on, Rio!" came Utah's clear, deadly voice. "I'm aimin' t' have yuh stay, I said."

A breathless silence held everyone in the barroom tense and straining. The two men who had been friends faced each other like caged animals, even their passions leashed and struggling below the surface. Utah's eyes were deadly. Rio's were blank walls of slate gray.

It was Rio who shook his head slowly. His hands had not moved. Not a muscle had quivered.

"Reckon we each know what the other feller can do, Utah," he admonished softly. "If this goes any further, one or both of us is due to die. Don't yuh reckon it might be a little early to go gettin' two men killed 'thout bein' sure jest why?"

There was something soothing, in that atmosphere of naked anger, about the measured coolness of his voice. Especially with the knowledge that all of them possessed—that behind that voice and the calm words stood a man who had faced many badmen and killers—and who was still very much alive.

Utah moistened his dry lips.

"Maybe yo're right," he said. "If yuh say yuh'll talk to the sheriff, we'll call it even for now."

Rio nodded. *"Bueno!* I'll do all I can t' see justice done," he promised.

He started for the door, turning his back coolly upon the room. Keno started and gave a soft curse.

"Utah, you ain't gonna—"

"He goes!" came Utah's snapping voice. "Right now, the man that gets in his way—is in mine!"

IV

RIO had halted at the hitching-rack, but no one had followed him to the door. There was a little, reminiscent smile on his wide mouth when he mounted and jogged at a walk back up the main street of Flagstop.

Utah had come through. Knowing the man and his sense of righteous obligations, Rio had wondered. He chuckled to himself.

"At that, he was pretty near right about one thing," he murmured aloud. "Nobody ever did figger how I manage to get along without workin' much."

As a matter of fact, Rio considered, he had not figured it out himself. In the very beginning he had acknowledged complete laziness. He did not like work—unless it was work that interested him at the moment.

So he had drifted. He had learned to play cards, though no one ever took him for a gambler. He was not a gambler—but often good gamblers had found a better one in him. That was when Rio found himself particularly hard pressed for money.

Sometimes he would take a job as a cowhand. He was a top-hand when he chose to be. But it never lasted for long.

Often he would borrow money—but always it was returned twenty-four hours later.

They knew that around Flagstop. For some reason, Rio had elected to stay there quite a time. He had entered when Utah and the Utah C outfit were engaged in a cattle war, and he had hired out his right arm and his gun to the young manager of the ranch. Afterward, he had worked for a time with the outfit; and then his laziness overtook him again. Once or twice he had returned for a month of work.

He was smiling. He hadn't figured out how he lived himself, but he did. Mostly it was by letting himself in for trouble.

"Too bad they ain't no reward for the capture o' Shorty's murderer," he muttered. "Wish I could let this die down till they offered one."

He glanced down possessively at a new lariat that hung coiled from his saddle. Rio seldom carried a lariat—never unless he was working on the range. He had taken this one from one of the mounts in front of the Red Flag.

He struck the road which came out of the desert eastward, wound in toward Flagstop, and then took its way out toward the ranches northward. It was on this road that he had found Shorty's horse —and subsequently, Shorty's body.

It was deserted now, almost as far as he could see. But beyond, up near where he knew the gully lay, a lone horseman was coming at a slow pace. Rio had an idea as to who it would be, and he nodded with satisfaction.

The hot roadway wandered up and down over rises and depressions in the uneven, verdureless terrain. Eastward there was the shimmer of the desert, and a strip of white held its way along the darker ground, marking the edge of the burning sands. Through narrowed eyes Rio regarded it.

Topping a slight rise a few minutes later, he made out the lone rider of the trail at the bottom of the depression. It was Speechless. Speechless stared at him with unfriendly eyes.

Rio grinned. "Yo're thinkin' o' that one about the murderer always returnin' to the scene o' his crime, ain't yuh, Speechless?" he taunted.

The little deputy drew up and regarded Rio with a frown. "I'd like t' be," he admitted. Then he pushed back the battered sombrero he wore and scratched his scant hair. "Nobody'd ever say yuh couldn't be a killer, Rio," he went on. "But I can't figger yuh killin' that way. I jest been to see 'im. Shorty wouldn't 'a' fell there. I figger he was hit, or knocked off his hoss. The way his skull's cracked in, yuh couldn't tell if a bullet or somethin' creased him first."

Rio nodded agreement. He hooked his right leg over his saddle horn and commenced a cigarette.

"Yore judgment's gettin' good, Speechless," he agreed. "This deputy job must be workin' on yuh." He lighted the cigarette. "Wanta find the hombre?"

"Ain't no use. Not if you don't know anything—"

"Maybe I do. Remember what I jest said about returnin' to the scene o' the crime? Well, this feller won't do that—unless somebody makes him!"

"Talkin' riddles, Rio?"

"No. But I can use yuh, Speechless, an' I've jest decided how. Go back t' town an' go into the Red Flag. Tell 'em yuh've seen the body an' left everything jest like it was, for Sheriff Bob when he comes back to-night. An' when they ask yuh what yuh seen, jest mention, casual-like, a lariat rope layin' there, *sabe?* Say yuh s'pose it musta been Shorty's."

"A—lariat rope?"

"Yeah, a lariat. Don't say no more than that. Foller me?"

"I s'pose I do, but—"

"That's enough. Yuh ain't got anything else t' do, have yuh? Know any reason why yuh shouldn't do that?"

"No."

"Good enough." Rio swung his foot back into the stirrup and caught up his bridle. *"Hasta la vista,* Speechless."

He turned away, and then pulled up a few feet beyond. Speechless still sat there, staring at him uncomprehendingly.

"Oh, yeah, maybe there's another thing. If they ask yuh did yuh see me, yuh might

say that the last yuh saw was my back, an' I was headin' for the desert—east! That'll make only one fib for yuh to-day—'cause I am."

Chuckling, he turned off the trail and disappeared over a ridge in the direction of the white shimmer of heat on the far horizon. He was soon out of sight of the deputy.

But he did not progress in the easterly direction for long after he had left Speechless' vision. On the level ground farther on, he pulled in the buckskin to a walk and turned northward. In that direction, a comparatively level plain of dull brown interspersed with patches of green in places, gave way, farther, to a dark depression in the land which he knew for the gully into which Shorty Bowers had dropped.

V

RIO had not long to wait. He had reached the gully from the eastern side, where a shoulder of land came up and hid all sight of the desert. Behind this he had picketed his mount and then slid down the declivity until he was at the bottom of the drop.

It was cool down here, after the intense heat that there was in the full glare of afternoon sun. The trees grew thick and close together on the eastern bank; and growing outward, they cast a greenish shade over the bottom of the gully.

It was quiet there, too—calm with the drowsy peace of afternoon, the quiet broken only by an occasional bird's chirp or the rustle of wings in some thicket.

Rio halted, squatting beside a rock, before he got to the bottom. He was about ten feet above where Shorty Bowers still lay. He smoked until he heard the soft, approaching thud of a pony's hoofs on the winding trail from Flagstop. Then he squashed his cigarette on the rock, and his whole lean figure became tense and waiting.

The pony's hoofs came nearer. Rio loosed the coiled *reata* he still carried and dropped it a few feet below and on the farther slope.

The hoofbeats ceased. There was the creak of saddle leather in the warm air as a rider dismounted. Then one black boot appeared through the growth that half hid the trail above. Behind it, a moment later, a dark figure slid into view among the jagged rocks. Rio gave a soft exclamation of satisfaction.

It was Keno!

Keno was supposed to be a gambler. The previous season he had run against Bob Simpson for sheriff, but had been persuaded to drop out of a losing race at the last hour. It was known that he coveted the office—and Rio suspected that only that fact kept Keno from the sort of gambling he was accustomed to indulging in.

Keno's past no one knew. But in Flagstop no one asked a man's past. Keno had simply drifted in, like Rio.

He halted, his legs braced against the treacheries of the slope. His dark, searching eyes darted all about. The silence was intensified as he stood there. He saw Shorty's body and gave it scarcely a glance.

A second later he saw the coiled rope. His eyes lighted; his figure stiffened. Again he looked about him suspiciously, alert; then he started for the lariat.

"I reckoned that'd bring yuh, Keno!"

Rio's voice was like ice. There, supposedly with only the dead body, it must have sounded to Keno like the voice of doom. Rio arose slowly from his concealment on the opposite slope of the gully.

"Figgered out," drawled Rio, "that yuh roped Shorty from his horse an' smashed him up here. Saw where yore heels dug in here when yuh throwed the rope. Got the *dinero* on yuh?"

Keno swore. "Why, yuh damned—"

"Oh, yeuh, it was me took yore lariat—after I left the Red Flag. I figgered yuh'd be kinda fussed. Yuh had to investigate anyhow, didn't yuh?"

Rio moved. In that instant, Keno moved too. His eyes were desperate, mad. He knew Rio's reputation, yet he had to deny the knowledge in that instant. And Rio had not counted on the courage that a cornered rat is reputed to have.

Keno's gun leapt from its holster like a flash. He slipped, with the jerky movement, just as his finger found the trigger. Twice the long forty-five spat lead across the rock-strewn gully.

Rio's hand had reached his gun butt just a second too late. He flung himself sidewise, just in time.

Red hot lead streaked through his right wrist as his revolver jerked free of its holster. He cursed—heard lead whistle by—his gun dropped, useless. Rio followed it, acting by instinct, his right hand red with blood.

Keno ripped out a heavy oath and then went scrambling wildly, madly, up the slope in the direction he had come. Rio, clenching his teeth on the pain of his wounded wrist, fumbled with his left hand until he found the gun. He brought it up unaccustomedly, and fired.

The lead sang through the trees. But Keno had already gained the trail. Another shot came from where he was hidden just as Rio gained his feet. It flew harmless and wide.

Rio swayed for a moment, undecided; but the indecision was not for long. If Keno got away the game was up. Nothing could be proved. Undoubtedly, the gambler had the money he had stolen about his person at this minute—hearing the report Rio had told Speechless to make, he had known fear, and had come here prepared to flee.

Now, if he got away, he could hide the wallet and the cash. Rio would be where he started from.

That was a good distance back. In the beginning, Rio had only known that Shorty's death was no accident.

He had seen the heelmarks left by the man who had thrown the lariat; and from that point it was easy to assume how Shorty had met his death. One jerk—and then a crash among the rocks below him.

The question of the murderer's identity still remained to be answered. That was why Rio had risked the scene at the Red Flag earlier. When Keno had betrayed himself with too anxious an alibi, Rio had reasoned out the ease with which the gambler could have got out of his room after he had so ostentatiously gone up to it.

Keno seemed a logical bet. Rio had played it to the full. He had taken Keno's lariat and brought it out here—to prove it. He had wanted to catch the gambler red-handed, with the goods on him.

And Keno had beaten him in the first brush.

The galloping hoofbeats of the gambler's horse were already retreating and growing duller. Rio threw his useless arm inside his shirt, forgot the pain, and swooping, retrieved the lariat he had thrown. Then he scrambled up the bank and gained the saddle of the waiting buckskin.

Turning, following the direction Keno had seemed to take, he caught sight of his man.

Keno was heading for the open desert!

With his left hand Rio stuck the pistol into his belt. Then he dug in his spurs and swung his pony's head, and, low in the saddle, rode in pursuit.

VI

UTAH LARIMER had heard the shots from far down the trail. He had ridden out from Flagstop with a grim jaw and narrowed eyes. A pistol swung low from his hip; it was not thonged down and it slapped as he rode, but he did not notice. Across the saddle, in a sheath, a Remington was stuck. Behind him there was a full canteen.

The scene in the Red Flag had not been soothing to the young master of the Utah C. Sheriff Bob Simpson had returned sooner than he had expected. It was an hour or so after Speechless had got back from the gully with his story.

Sheriff Bob listened to all the details in an icy silence. Then he fixed Speechless with angry eyes.

"So Rio Taylor struck for the desert?" he repeated. "An' yuh let him go?"

"Yeah. When a man tells yuh, open-like—"

"Hell! Yo're fired. Gimme yore star!" Simpson swung from the now truly speechless deputy upon Utah Larimer.

"An' you let 'im go, too, huh—jes' because he was tellin' yuh 'open-like'?"

Utah spread his long legs far apart and faced the sheriff.

"Yuh don't even know it's a murder yet, Bob. An' I'm bankin' on Rio t' show up."

"Then what'd he hit for the desert for?" Simpson demanded.

There was a low growl of agreement. Flagstop prided itself upon swift and sure justice.

"We all know Rio pretty well," Simpson went on, "but this here business could 'a' been done by anybody. Yuh say we don't know it was murder. No, we don't. But does anybody doubt it? Do you?"

"I doubt that Rio Taylor had anything t' do with it," Utah answered stubbornly. "If he's gone—"

"If he's gone, they's a danged good reason!" the sheriff swore. "No man's riding out into that sand without one. Rio found the body an' he was the last man seen with Shorty. He don't stay and he wouldn't answer questions. *I want Rio Taylor!*"

"Do yuh?" Utah straightened. He took a hitch at his belt. "Well, I reckon it's my game. If Rio oughta be here and ain't, I let him go. So I'm goin' to bring him back!"

VII

HE was in a black mood. In the beginning he had been desperately intent on getting to the bottom of Shorty's death at once. Then Rio had brought him up. Face to face with the man he knew and liked so well, Utah had cooled. In his mind, he became certain that Rio could not have committed the crime.

Now he was faced with the fact that Rio had disappeared—struck for the open desert, immediately after that scene in the Red Flag. No men ventured into that desert without a good reason.

He hated the conclusion that was forced upon him, and it made him savagely desperate in his pursuit. He wanted Rio now—personally!

He had been intending to go to the gully first and look over the ground. The sheriff would be out soon, to remove Shorty's body; he wanted to survey the scene first. Then, as he rode along, the furious shooting from the direction of the gully fell on his ears.

He brought up, startled and alert. On the heels of his first surprise and astonishment, he dug in his spurs and reached the crest of the rise in the trail just ahead of him. There was nothing to be seen at first; the placid open stretched away serene and calm toward his own ranch northward, and the gully was only a dark depression in the terrain.

But suddenly, breaking out from the shoulder of land northward, a rider appeared, streaking to the east. At that distance he was not recognizable, and a moment later he was out of sight. The heat haze on the horizon swallowed him.

Utah swore softly when, a moment later, another rider burst into view on the heels of the first.

He dug in his spurs and brought down his quirt. A second afterward, he was riding hard in pursuit.

Both riders were well out of sight, however. They had been far off when he had first distinguished them; he knew that the white heat of the desert would swallow them up and make them vanish. He knew that pursuit was useless, but nevertheless he obeyed his first impulse and hung on.

It was a losing game, he told himself. At the desert edge, he would be faced with failure. Out there, they could go in one of two directions, and he would not know which to follow.

Only a man who knew the country would dare to venture into that desert. There were two waterholes. The Gila hole was nearer, southward. It had a habit of drying up with little warning.

The second hole was a far cry from Flagstop, and a dangerous journey to attempt; but for one who knew it, it marked the shortest trail across the white-hot valley of sand. Beyond it the oases were closer together, and afforded plenty of shelter to the traveler for the remainder of the trail—once it was reached.

Who had the two men been? Why had they gone as they did? Utah felt that if

he could answer those questions he would know what direction they had taken.

Perhaps one of them had been Rio—and yet Speechless had reported Rio to have set off in another direction, from nearer to Flagstop. What would Rio be doing in the vicinity of the gully now, and who would be pursuing him?

Utah frowned his black frown, bent low over his mare's back, and rode on.

Sand was spurned from beneath the horse's hoofs; the glare of the sun on white sand beat back and struck at him like a blow. His eyes half closed, he kept on—and then, unwillingly, settled back and commenced to rein in.

"Where the hell 'm I goin'?" he demanded of the white loneliness.

The heat was like a blast from an open furnace. Life was shrivelled; the world lay panting and inert. Utah's horse came down to a walk, and then slowed some more.

After all, he told himself, he had started out after Rio Taylor. Maybe one of these men was he—but both of them had vanished. Heat devils shimmered on the horizon; they were like a magic curtain that had come down behind the two horsemen.

He had forsaken his job thus far—now he recalled it to himself. He came to a dead halt and his narrowed eyes surveyed helplessly the white wastes that stretched to right and left and before him.

"If Rio's runnin', he'll take the long trail," he told his pony. "That's Rio. I know him. If he ain't got nothin' t' run about. . . . Hell, if he ain't got nothin' to run about, what in blazes is he doin' out here?"

That remained unanswerable. Utah's eyes were suddenly caught by something dark which stood out against the blazing white of the sand. It lay ahead of him. He touched his spurs and moved toward it.

Above it, he swore softly. It was a signal—a signal of some sort, for it had been placed carefully, this strange pattern on the sand. Frowning, Utah dismounted.

A few drops of blood were about the spot, telling a mute tale. In the center of them lay three pieces of lariat rope, rather carefully cut. The three, placed together, formed an arrowhead.

Utah straightened suddenly. His eyes followed the direction in which the rope arrow pointed. Sticky blood covered the rope in splotches, but he had taken that in at once and then forgot it. His hat came off and he slapped his chaps viciously.

"Sufferin' prairie dogs!" he burst out. "It's Rio—an' he's leavin' a note t' tell me which way he's goin'!"

The blood-marked arrow of lariat rope pointed in the direction of the second water hole—the long and dangerous pull a fourth of the way across the desert.

VIII

FAR ahead, Rio Taylor rode his saddle like a blinded and drunken man, shamelessly holding to his pommel to keep upright. He had been riding for hours—days, it seemed—days of torture and despair and burning, of insufferable heat and agony.

One thing he knew—Keno, riding ahead of him, must not know how badly off he was. That was the thought that kept drumming through his brain.

He could see Keno pressing on ahead, as he had been for all those weary, tortured hours, keeping to the same pace, spurring when Rio spurred, and walking when Rio walked. Rio wondered—in fact, he was becoming certain by now—that Keno had a good idea of how badly his pursuer was wounded, and the fugitive counted on wearing him down.

Keno wavered in a haze. He was only a dark, upright splotch, he and his horse—distinguishable only because he was darker than the blazing white sand. Sometimes he disappeared; but Rio hung doggedly on.

Earlier, they had exchanged shots. Rio could not have told whether they were within pistol range now. He only hung on. Once one of the gambler's bullets had creased his pursuer's forehead near the temple. The blood was in Rio's eyes at times, and it had caked on his skin, but he kept on.

For long moments he forgot why he was following. The loss of blood had made

him weak and dizzy. He only remembered that he had to hang on.

He had been sparing of his ammunition. It was hard to reload, using his teeth and his left hand. Even that hand was getting clumsy; several cartridges had dropped into the sand, and he did not believe one had struck his man.

His right arm was numb, and blood dripped steadily from the hole in the wrist. Slowly, but steadily.

Rio's head had fallen forward and he suddenly sat up with a jerk. The shadows were falling athwart the hot sands; the sun was lowering westward. There was a dark something on the eastern horizon.

He blinked. With his good hand he tried to wipe away the blood from his eyes. But his vision was misted. Ahead lay something—it must be the waterhole!

The tongue moved in his dried mouth. When he would have uttered a grateful gasp, the sound stuck in his throat raspingly. His cracked lips parted and his jaws sagged. He felt for his revolver again, where it stuck in his belt.

Then he saw Keno.

Keno had reached the edge of the waterhole, where a long cactus stood sentinel and some manzanita scrub grew sparsely. That was all. But Keno and his horse were two separate figures now.

In the waning sunlight something gleamed, and forgotten senses stung Rio to wariness. He pulled on his bridle and his buckskin slowed up.

In the next second the silence of the desert was shattered by a sharp pistol shot, and lead went singing by. Rio brought up his gun, jerked in on his bridle, and fired at that hazy figure at the edge of the hole.

"Stay where yuh are, Rio—or—"

Crack! Keno's pistol spoke again. Rio saw the flash through his misted consciousness. And coincident with it, the buckskin quivered suddenly as if from a blow, and then reared, screaming, into the air.

Rio had just enough strength to loose the bridle and throw himself free, as the faithful horse came down on its side. It was instinct which made him fling himself flat on the sand, too.

The buckskin was quivering. Behind the animal's heaving sides, Rio crept up and put his pistol against its head. His next shot was muffled and the buckskin lay still.

There was moisture in his eyes now. For a long time there was silence. Rio felt weak and sick. Ahead was Keno—and now there was a score that only death could wipe out. Death was close—Rio knew that; and he cursed, sobbing, because he knew that he had not the strength to close in with his enemy.

Keno had won. Here in the lee of his horse, Rio must die—die of thirst, and hunger, and his wounds.

Weakness gripped him. He raised his head in a last desperate effort, and immediately a shot sang through the air. He heard Keno's laugh—cold and harsh.

"Yo're finished, Rio! Think I don't know yuh can't get up an' fight? I'm leavin' yuh here as soon as I'm sure of yuh—leavin' yuh with Shorty's empty wallet!"

Rio groaned. If Utah came, that would be the way he'd find him. That would be all they would know.

He dug an elbow into the sand and strove to steady his left arm to raise himself. His teeth were biting into his under lip fiercely; the pain gave him a certain strength. It was growing darker; was it the fading daylight, he wondered or himself?

The curse that he gave was a sob. Whatever happened, the end must not come this way. Not for Rio Taylor. It mustn't. A finish fight—even if he couldn't aim!

He brought himself up again—tried to find Keno and align his sights. Then he gasped.

Keno was walking toward him!

Crack! The first shot came. Rio ducked sidewise instinctively, recovered, and fired. Keno laughed. Rio groaned in impotent anguish.

He fired again. Keno's returning bullet was imbedded in the belly of the dead beast behind which Rio lay. Again! The lead sang close. Rio's eyes were almost closed as he sighted and pulled the trigger with the last of his strength.

He missed.

And then there were three shots all together. Strange shots they were, to Rio's numbed brain. Was it true, or had Keno not halted? Was he sagging out there—weaving strangely in a little circle?

Keno was firing again—but not at him. And he *was* sagging; his knees sagged, and he had halted. He was firing madly, pumping the last cartridges out of his gun at a horseman bearing down from the right of them both!

"Utah!" Rio cried.

He saw Keno bring up his gun again, cursing, in a last endeavor to kill. Then his own sights were aligned. For a second he could see. His forty-five spoke.

Keno gasped; his pistol fell from his fingers; he toppled headlong into the sand. Over his body a huge mare came tearing at a gallop.

Rio's head sank against the body of his faithful buckskin, and his eyes closed. He felt fingers fumbling at his throat—heard the gurgle of water in a canteen. Through cracked lips, he mumbled:

"You—Utah? Reckoned yuh'd know what I meant. Reckoned yuh'd—come. Yuh'll find the wallet—on him."

"I've got it figured out," Utah said softly. "Don't try t' talk now. Saw the arrow an' knew yuh'd left it there for me. Till I came up, I couldn't figger out why. An' then—when there was no time t' talk or ask any more questions—I figgered the rest an' jumped in."

Rio opened his eye. It was dark.

"How'd yuh know which side to take, Utah?" he asked softly.

"I didn't, yuh danged fool!" Utah returned in an angry voice. "I only knowed one of 'em—was you!"

HARRY STONE, LIGHTWEIGHT BOXER

ONE of the cleverest lightweights in the East a little over ten years ago was Harry Stone, who during his career was as good a scrapper for his weight as the game boasted. He is now training younger fighters in Australia. Below is an account, in his own words, of his life and battles:

"I received my start in the roughest and toughest school in the world, and I don't think that any fistic star ever got along faster or had a stiffer course upward than I had. Every newsboy is some scrapper. If you want to get a living at selling papers you've got to be the toughest boy in the precinct. And believe me I was tough; I could hold down any beat in little old New York.

"My first fight, however, came about quite differently. It was with a man—a dude. I was standing on a Broadway corner selling papers.

"The dude turned on me, and we had a scrap right then. He was a good deal taller than I, so I had to jump up every time I wanted to reach his face. That was the first time I ever practised my famous kangaroo jump. The dude soon had enough, and I've never been able to lose that jump since.

"By the time we had finished we had a big crowd largely composed of newsboys around us. They were tickled to death at my victory, and hailed me then and there as "Kid" Stone. They became greatly interested in me, and finally took me around to Jim Buckley, who later managed Gunboat Smith and Tommy Murphy.

"After that I went steadily ahead. I still sold papers because I wasn't earning enough out of the fighting game both to support me and to help at home.

"Any breakdown in a fight always sent Buckley looking for me, and after a bit the other promoters got to know that I only wanted a few hours notice—just time to get a shower bath, say. No sooner had word been received that a fellow ran out of a fight, than I was sent for to fill the breach. And I did.

"I was only a featherweight, but they served me up lightweights, middleweights, and welterweights. I fought them all. They called me the 'Substitute King,' and 'New York Battling Nelson.'

"When I first landed in Australia they handed me as a starter Hooks Key, one of the very best fighters Australia ever produced. They noticed my cigars, and my way of training, and went away saying that I was a big mug.

"Well, Hook and I went the full twenty rounds and I don't think he won a round. That brought the public around. They admitted that I was clever, but they all agreed that I didn't have the punch, and that I couldn't take one.

"After much difficulty I managed to get a match with Johnny Summers, a much heavier man. The public called the match a big joke, and bet ten to one on Summers. We met at catchweights and I won. To prove my superiority I met Summers in a return bout and again defeated him.

"The people in Australia are real sports, and they have always gone out of the way to make me feel at home. I only wish I could do more than I am now doing to show my gratitude."

THE OLD HOKUM BUCKET

By Bud Jones

Ask "Flash" Bernstein if tiger epiglottis juice ain't good for leather laryngitis!

"PSYCHOLOGY," remarks Mr. "Barnacle" Barrett, "may be the oyster's instep in certain fields of endeavor, but any box-fight manager which mixes it up with his business is travelin' with trouble. Speakin' for myself, I'd sooner learn left hooks to a panther than toy with it."

With which sweepin' statement, Mr. Barnacle Barrett takes a fresh grip on his stogie and glares challenge at me through the sweat-laden atmosphere of the dressin' room.

"Do you mean to say," I demand, "that you don't think psychology plays any part in the boxin' game? How about—"

"Listen," says Mr. Barnacle Barrett, "I never said no such a damn thing. What I said is that anybody which mixes his psychology and boxin' is promotin' trouble—nothin' but trouble. And the tip comes from a man which knows his psychology—plenty."

"Where," says I by the way of arousin' Mr. Barrett, "do you get all your dope on psychology. I never heard of you—"

"No," Mr. Barrett admits, "and they are several other things you never heard of, which is neither here, there nor elsewhere. As a matter of fact, you are now speakin' to a party which prob'ly knows more about psychology than Old Man Psycho himself, a party to which psychoanalysis is a opened book and which is hep to all the trimmin's of same. If it's information you're after, lash yourself to a stanchion and you'll get it."

"Shoot," says I.

"Remember Benny 'Flash' Bernstein?" suggests Mr. Barrett. "Sure you remember him. I make his name a household word in America and he makes me a near psychopathic case. Benny learned me about psychology—and *how!*

"Listen, when I get hold of Benny he's the flashiest 130-pound preliminary boy between Los Angeles and points north, south, east and west. What Benny ain't got in the way of speed, sock and ring sense is something which he don't need. The kid is one of the greatest boys I ever see in my life, Johnny, speakin' from a purely natural ability standpoint. A natural born boxer and a showman with it.

He can do everything but take 'em — a champeen up to, but not includin', the point at which he's rapped on the whiskers. A good stiff smack any place above the ankles transforms Benny from a able exponent of the manly art to a expert high diver. Leather laryngitis, Johnny—worst case I ever see. Give him a smell of the leather attached to the right hand of a opponent, and he can't swallow. And the only thing that relieves him in these spells is the final count of a even ten. They's plenty of boys sufferin' with the same melody.

"At the time I grab Benny off by depletin' the Barrett bankroll a half grand, I ain't got no suspicions that he's anything but what he looks like. I've seen him in action just once, against a knockover at a newsboys' club. On this occasion he conducts himself accordin' to the best traditions of the game, usin' most of the stuff in the book before he discontinues the battle with a short right which jars the customers back as far as row 'M.' In three rounds, so far as I can see, the only glove which is laid on him is a punch on the knee, parked there at a time when his adversary's both eyes are closed and he is hittin' from memory only.

"However, it don't take me a semester to get wise to Benny's weakness. The first time he works in the gym I tumble. I've threw 'Sock' McAuliffe, a slashin' young featherweight, in with Benny in the gym, and for three rounds Benny learns him what is a left hook and a right cross. Then Sock inadvertently slaps Benny with a long right, and my dream of handlin' a lightweight champeen is over.

"Benny gets white from the hair down, shoots a pathetic look at me and gets on his bicycle.

"It's a good, stiff punch, Johnny, but it ain't nothin' to bring on no complexes. Just enough to wake a boy with a fightin' heart up. Honest, in my whole life I never see such a change of pace, in or out of the ring, as now takes place. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde never done it more realistic. One minute Benny looks like a champeen, and the next minute he looks like a female impersonator.

"Sock has chased him a quarter mile before I recover enough to call time.

"'What in hell is the matter with you?' says I.

"'I'm sick,' says Benny.

"'I know,' says I, 'but how'd you get that way so quick?'

"'It musta been somethin' I eat for lunch,' he alibis. 'I been kinda off my feed lately.'

"'Well,' I comes back, 'I never paid no half grand for a weak stomach. How long you been squeamish?'

"'I'll be oak to-morrow,' he tells me. 'I need a rest.'

"'So'd your old man,' says I, 'if he'd of run as far in the last three minutes as you have. Go out and grab yourself off some air.'

"But whatever air Benny grabs off, it don't do his larnyx no good. Sock chases him outa the ring again the next day.

"'Listen,' I tells Benny, when I have finally called the marathon off, 'if I didn't have you booked for Friday night, I'd knock your ears down and throw you out a window myself. A buttercup is a he-man alongside of you They's more ki-yi in you than a yellow pup. I'll take my Friday night cut and charge the rest of my half grand to experience, although God knows I don't need experience that bad. Anybody wants your contract can have it for a song, and I'll sing the song. Getta hell outa here.'

"'Honest, Mr. Barrett,' Benny pleads, 'I don't feel good.'

"'I know you don't,' I growls. 'You and Fred Fulton got the same disease—longitudinitis.'

"And I don't take another look at him until he shows up at the Hollywood Stadium Friday night.

"'How's your stomach?' I asts him as he's gettin' out of his clothes.

"'I feel better,' says he.

"'Oak,' says I. 'Leave your bicycle in the dressin' room.'

"Benny's turn is a six-round special between the semi-wind-up and the night cap. For five spasms he steps around his opponent like a wooden horse goes round a merry-go-round, hookin', jabbin', crossin'

and mixin' in a bit of straight-eight sockin'. Toward the close of the fifth, however, the groggy pigeon which is facin' him sneaks a right to Benny's button—the first punch Benny's taken all evenin'.

"Benny goes down like a rock in his own corner and woulda been there yet, so far as either him or me is concerned, if the bell hadn't of saved him at the count of eight.

"They's nothin' gentle in the way I get *that* Yellow Kid to his corner.

" 'Listen, you quitter,' I growl into his ear as I souse him in the pan with a sponge. 'You snap outa it and make the snappin' snappy. If you don't come up for the sixth, I'm goin' to drag you down to a dressin' room and knock you stiff every fifteen minutes for the rest of the night. Get that.'

"Benny opens his eyes, gulps a coupla time and sits up on his stool. That punch on the button didn't hurt him no more than it did the ticket taker at the front gate.

" 'And don't think I'm givin' you a bedtime story, either,' I raps, joltin' him with the smellin' salts. 'I mean every word of it. You go out and stop this pigeon, or I'll stop you so many times in the next few hours you'll never get started again. Get goin'!'

"Benny gulps, but he goes out at the bell, with a hurt look on his face.

"For about thirty seconds after the start of the sixth, this shrunken vi'let of the roped arena ain't got his mind made up whether to take a dive or not. He's backpeddlin', half set to do another halfgaynor, and his groggy opponent is crowdin' him around the ring tryin' to get a glove on him, when I stick my head up over the edge of the ring and fix him with a murd'rous eye. It don't take no crystal gazer to tell what I'm thinkin'.

"Benny takes a good look at me, another at the ham which is chasin' him, and goes to work. In fifteen seconds he has his pursuer on the ropes, and in another ten seconds the referee is doin' his stuff. Benny has laid him flatter'n a mackerel. Boy! How that kid can sock when he's in a sockin' mood!

"As a result of this battle, I make up my mind to keep Benny, guts or no guts, and see what can I do with him. All he needs is a shot of nerve in the arm—but try and get it there.

" 'Listen,' I plead with him, 'you got everything in the world to make you a champeen, to get you up in the big money. There ain't a boy in the game to-day can box with you, and there ain't a boy of your weight can sock with you. I know all the tricks of the game and I'm goin' to teach 'em to you. Get that lump outa your throat and let's go after the lightweight title. Whadda you say, kid? Le's go!'

"But you can't make a saxophone player outa a swordfish, and you can't learn *heart* to nobody. Benny's just natu'ally yellow.

"We win a couple more starts because my buttercup outboxes his opponents so far he don't have to take nothin', and to the casual observer it might appear that we're sittin' pretty. What the casual observer don't know, however, is that Benny now actually refuses to climb into the trainin' ring with Sock McAuliffe, and that he's so careful I have to rig up a private gymnasium to keep the gang in Tin Ear Alley from gettin' wise to him.

" 'You should oughta join a sewin' circle,' Sock tells him disgusted.

"To which Benny's only answer is a gulp.

"It's durin' his fourth fight under my management that I get the psychology idea. Up to this time we've managed pretty well to keep Benny's shrinkin' complex under cover, although the wise boys is hep to the fact that Benny can't take 'em. It's rumored around that he's got a floatin' chin, but nobody has yet accused him of havin' a case of chronic leather laryngitis.

"Benny is breezin' along easy in this fourth start when he gets a slap on the side curtains and goes down. The slap he takes ain't enough to make a school teacher groggy, but Benny is barely on his feet at the count of ten, and from this point on he roller skates from here to Kennebunkport, Maine. Threats don't do no good;

he don't leave this other boy get near enough to him again to hit him with a glove on the end of a fish pole—and a palooka which he should of knocked over without raisin' a sweat, grabs a decision from him.

"I'm burnt up like a bride's biscuits, and the razzin' Benny gets from the bugs when he leaves the ring, don't cool me off none. It's the finish; everyone is now hep to the fact that my sympathetic gladiator is the same color as a taxicab. Gettin' matches in the future will be as easy as gettin' sympathy outa a traffic cop. We're through.

"'A very interestin' case,' a voice says in my ear as I'm tryin' to control my seethin' sentiments whilst my protegé is receivin' a reverse English ovation. 'A very interestin' case.'

"'Yeah?' says I sarcastic, turnin' to find a uptown bozo with a gray mustache and a eye-glass at my elbow. 'What's so damn interestin' about it?'

"'I take it,' says this baby, handin' me a card, 'that you're the manager of the —ah—er—defeated lad in this last contest?'

"'I *was*,' I tell him, 'up to about three minutes ago. After I have give that buttercup a trimmin' myself, him and me parts comp'ny.'

"'It is my belief,' this party goes on, 'that you would be committin' a grievous error in relinquishin' any—er—claims which you may have upon his services, Mr.—ah—'

"'Barrett,' says I. 'Barnacle Barrett.'

"'Mr. Barrett. I do not pretend to know anything of this lad's natural qualifications as a boxer. I am led to believe, however, through comments I have overheard here to-night, that he possesses exceptional talent and unusual skill. Am I correct in my assumption?'

"'He' got everything in the world but guts,' I growl, 'which is about the same thing as sayin' that a automobile has everything but a engine.'

"'Ah, yes. He lacks courage, is a victim, let us say, of a strikin' complex. The case is interestin' to me because it involves an unusual situation, that of a man possessin', apparently, little or no native courage, who chooses a profession or callin' in which so high a premium is placed on that quality.'

"'No foolin',' I admits. 'A pigeon without guts ain't got no business in this man's game. And it's the on thing you can't learn nobody.'

"'I'm not so sure,' this baby comes back with a smile. 'If you will consult the card in your hand, you will be apprised that I am Dr. Johann Steinmetz, specialist in nervous diseases. Your young protégé is a case for a psychoanalyst.'

"'In about fifteen minutes,' says I, 'he'll be a case for a undertaker.'

"He smiles again. 'Nevertheless,' says he, 'the lad is now a case for a pyschoanalyst. I would be glad to give him an examination with a view to removin' the condition responsible for his apparent lack of—er—guts, as you call it.'

"'It can't be done,' I tells him. 'And farther and more, I wouldn't spend another dime on him if I owned a night club.'

"'You mistake my intentions,' Dr. Johann Steinmetz informs me. 'I have a scientific interest in the case. Examination and treatment will cost you nothin'. If I affect a cure, it will be time enough to speak of money.'

"'Well,' says I, 'if you can do anything with him you're a better man than either me or Gunga Din. But as long as it ain't settin' me back nothin', hop to it.'

"'I will have to have a certain amount of cooperation from you, or someone in authority with the lad. I would advise you not to relinquish any contract with him which you may now hold. Unless I am greatly mistaken, he will prove a valuable asset to you in the near future.'

"'Oak,' says I. 'I'll keep this synthetic slugger until I see can you psycho-analyze some guts into him. If you can't, he ain't worth a dime to nobody.'

"'Very well,' this Dr. Steinmetz tells me. 'Bring him to my office at 10 o'clock to-morrow mornin'. The address is on the card.'

"Which is where I begin to get edu-

cated in psychology. "Benny, of course, puts up a holler when I spring Dr. Johann Steinmetz on him in the dressin' room, figurin' he might get thumped on the chest or somethin', but I've had all the holler outa this baby that I can take.

"'Get this!' I tells him. 'You be at the doc's office at 10 bells in the a. m., or me and Sock McAuliffe'll come up and get you. I should oughta give you a lacin' now for the bicycle act you put on tonight, but it may not be your fault that you're yellow, accordin' to the doc, and I'll let it go at that. In the meantime, don't forget to-morrow mornin' at the doc's office. That goes.'

"You'd think Benny was takin' a examination to get into Yale, the way this Dr. Steinmetz goes after him when my reluctant arena orchid shows up next mornin'. He asts Benny everything from what color socks does he like to how old is his old man, and by the time he has went through the list, both me and Benny is word-goofy.

"'Have you ever sustained a severe shock—a terrible fright of any kind?' is his last question.

"'*Has* he?' says I. 'Every time he gets rapped it shocks his whole family, and he suffers terrible fright every time he crawls between the ropes.'

"However, Benny can't remember no particular shock or fright, and the doc calls it a day on the questions and answers turn.

"'Proba'ly pre-natal influence,' he guesses, standin' up and puttin' his hands on Benny's shoulders. 'My boy, I don't believe you will ever ag'in lack courage in the ring. Your case is a very common one which yields readily to a recently discovered treatment—a serum and extract taken from the swollen epiglottis of an enraged tiger. We will inject the serum at once, and your manager will administer the extract under directions from me.'

"Benny almost faints when the needle is stuck in his leg, but he weathers the punishment.

"'You will immediately begin to feel courage surgin' through your veins,' this bozo Steinmetz informs the droopin' Benny. 'Encourage the feelin'. At the end of a few days, perhaps at once, you will find that blows administered by an opponent stimulate this feelin' and create in you a desire to do great physical injury to the author of the blows. Instead of shrinkin' from farther punishment, you will seek it. The courage of an enraged tiger is in your blood; nothin' but unconsciousness will kill it. Remember this always, and when the desire to kill sweeps over you in a ring encounter, give way to it—tear, rend, annihilate. Your natural ability as a boxer will protect you from the danger of such state of mind in the ring.'

"Can you imagine a line of eye-water like that?

"'Maybe I shouldn't mention it,' says I to this baby Steinmetz, 'but if you think—'

"'Just a minute,' Steinmetz counters, at the same time talkin' me outa the play with a wave of his hand. To Benny he says, 'How do you feel now, my lad? Has the serum begun to take effect?'

"'I feel pretty good,' Benny admits half-hearted. 'It does sorta feel like somethin' is happenin'.'

"'That'll be all to-day. Come back again at 10 o'clock to-morrow mornin'. I want a few words alone with Mr. Barrett.'

"'Applesauce,' says I as soon as Benny has took the air. 'Where do you get that tiger's epiglottis stuff?'

"'Applesauce, certainly,' Steinmetz admits calm, 'but it is a brand of applesauce, as you call it, which will affect a cure—with your cooperation. I injected nothin' but plain water into his leg, and the extract which you are to administer to him is nothin' but plain water with a little salt for flavoring. The boy is the victim of a mental attitude which nothin' but applesauce will cure. Do you care to continue the experiment?'

"That'd set you back on your heels, eh?

"'Well,' I gulp, bobbin' a bit, 'it sounds reasonable. It can't hurt him none, I guess, and if he can get a tiger's temper outa a shot of water in the leg, it's jake with me.'

"Steinmetz hands me a funny lookin'

bottle with a fancy label on it. 'That's the sensible attitude to take,' he opines. 'In this bottle is the extract of an angered tiger's epiglottis—in other words, plain water. Put a half dozen drops of this into his waterbucket whenever he goes into the ring in trainin' or exhibition; use a sponge and bathe his face and head between rounds with it. When he wants a drink, squeeze water into his mouth from the sponge. Don't let him drink anything else while he's in action. Do you understand?'

"I give him the nod.

" 'And here,' handin' me another bottle, 'is a duplicate bottle containin' a harmless but powerful irritant. If there is a animal about your trainin' quarters—a cat or dog—I would suggest that you give it a sponge bath from a bucket containin' a half dozen drops of this, in the presence of your boxer. The effect on the animal will impress upon the young man the potency of the extract which is bein' administered to him. Farther, I want you to encourage in him the hunch that he is developin' the traits of a tiger; that he is becomin' a fierce fightin' machine which nothin' can stop, and that a blow stimulates him to a killin' fury. Do you understand?'

"I give him the nod again.

" 'In the meantime,' this nerve sharpshooter finishes up, 'you will keep in daily telephone communication with me, and I will see the lad every mornin' here in my office. That will be all.'

"Which it looks like to me is plenty.

"By the time I have got back to the gym where Benny is workin', I'm ready to lay odds that this Dr. Steinmetz is a lotta hooey and that I ain't all altogether, to be strugglin' along with him. While I'm watchin' Benny outa the corner of my eye, and tryin' to dope the play, a big tomcat which has been hangin' around the joint struts in.

" 'I'll give a tumble,' says I to myself. 'It can't hurt nobody but the cat.'

"I signal Benny to lay off, and give him the line of hokum about this tiger's epiglottis extract, explainin' how a human don't feel it except that they get more guts than a drunken lumberjack, while a animal like say a cat, shows immediate signs of the effect.

" 'We'll try it out on this here back fence warbler,' says I.

"Which we done. I get consider'bly scratched up performin' the feat, but that tomcat gets a good sponge bath, after which he arches his back and gets busy. And if you ever see a feline move around lively, this said feline is the one of which we're speakin'. In the next three minutes, this big tom does approximately fifty miles around the gym in nothin' and four-fifths flat, spittin' like a wind-broken flivver and clawin' and snarlin' at everything which gets in his way. For a time it looks like he's goin' to chase both me and Benny outa the joint, but he changes his mind and does a Brodie outa second-story window, takin' it on the run down the alley and disappearin' in a cloud of blue smoke. Action? Boy! Plenty, and nothin' but!

" 'For gosh sakes,' says Benny, wipin' his mouth with the back of a glove. 'It sure made him mad, didn't it?'

" 'Nothin' in between,' I agree. 'Must be powerful stuff.'

" 'Gosh,' says Benny softly.

"When Benny comes back from this Steinmetz's office the next mornin', I get the surprise of my life.

" 'Listen,' says he. 'See can you get Sock McAuliffe to work with me again. I gotta have somebody to box with.'

"I swallow my Adam's apple and put in a telephone call for Sock.

" 'And listen,' Benny adds. 'Fix up a bucket of that tiger's epiglottis extract you give the cat yesterday.'

"Sock shows up with a grin on his face, and departs with it all washed off, in addition to a smoked lamp and a couple misplaced features. Benny near murders him, takes it toe-to-toe with him and shoots it out. Socks gettin' a worm's eye view of the rafters before the end of the first round.

" 'For the luvva Pete?' queries Sock on his way out. 'Whatsa matter of that baby! He's fulla homicide. I never see him like that before.'

" 'I just had him under cover, Sock,'

says I, 'because I been afraid he'd kill somebody if he cut loose. I got him pretty well under control now.'

"'I wish you'd of used some of that control while I was in there,' opines Sock, rubbin' his jaw. 'He was tryin' to murder me, don't think he wasn't. Say! They ain't a welterweight in the country can shoot it out with him like he was just now. Wow! How that baby can sock.'

"And Sock takes him some air, still rubbin' his button and shakin' his head.

"Sock ain't no more floored by the exhibition than I am, and that's plenty. Imagine a bashful buttercup like Benny developin' over-night into a fightin' fool which gets happy when he's slapped on the whiskers. And don't think Benny don't get slapped. He's in there tradin' punches, takin' one to give one, not even attemptin' to box, and I'm a Eskimo heavyweight if Sock don't level with a right on his chin a half dozen times before Benny drops him.

"Benny's got a grin on his face and a big lump under his eye at the end of the affair. Me? I got visions of managin' the lightweight champeen of the world, if Doc Steinmetz and the old hokum bucket hold out.

"'Better let me take care of that bottle of extract,' Benny suggests as he leaves the gym. 'You might let it get broke.'

"'Don't worry,' says I. 'That bottle is goin' to make me manager of the lightweight champeen of the world.'

"'No foolin',' says Benny.

"But don't think I don't have my troubles gettin' work for Benny.

"'You couldn't get that shy-foot into the stadium in a trunk,' growls Tom Mallory when I have fin'lly got him in a corner and broach the subject. 'He's wet as a whale's chin, so far as this arena's concerned.'

"'I been baritoned by experts before, Tom,' I tell him. 'You got the kid all wrong, account of his last showin'. It was my fault. I had him under wraps because he socks so hard I been afraid he'd kill somebody.'

"'Pick up the dice,' says Tom. 'I don't tie that one. Why, say—that cubeb of yours couldn't lick a Singer midget with a black-jack.'

"'Is zat so?' I come back. 'You get 'One-Step' Callahan for him and if my boy don't stop him, he works for nothin'. Farther and more, I got 500 megs which, speakin' at 250, says Benny'll take him. Is that man's talk?'

"'Callahan'll murder him,' sneers Tom, 'but your proposition has its good points. You're on—no purse if he don't stop Callahan, and $500 on the side at two-to-one. A week from Friday night. You get the san'wich spot.'

"Is zat gambling, I ast you?

"You know what Benny done to One-Step. No? Well, listen. Before Benny gets outa his corner in the first round, this rough-tough baby rushes in and floors him—one of them wild right-hand punches which is li'ble to get anybody. And they was plenty on it.

"'Turn on the lights,' yells some bug in the one-dollar seats. 'We wanta read.'

"Benny takes a long count, shakin' that right hand outa his brain, whilst I'm havin' a nervous breakdown in the corner—*and gets up with a grin!*

"The tiger's epiglottis is workin'.

"One-Step rushes, but the groggy Benny ain't asleep at the switch this time. He shifts outa the corner, slammin' home a stiff left hook on the way out. One-Step gets his bearin's and charges in, and for the next two minutes them bugs see a lotta gloves.

"This time Benny don't shift. He straightens One-Step up with right uppercut, and starts sockin'—the kind of game One-Step likes. And Benny *makes* him like it!

"The bell finds Callahan crumbled up in the middle of the ring after a brief pettin' party which has the startled bugs standin' in their chairs and tearin' the roof off.

"His handlers make a wild effort to get One-Step back to earth, but when the bell sounds for the second round, he don't know yet whether he's been blasted or sandbagged.

"When Benny leaves the ring, the customers give him a hand which is heard

down at Santa Monica. He has slugged his way back to popularity. Fat chance to keep him outa a Hollywood ring now.

"'The treatment is proving effective,' remarks Doc Steinmetz, poppin' up outa the howling mob. 'The boy has responded in a remarkable fashion. The improvement will continue. Carry through your instructions and we'll make him a champeen.'

"This Callahan battle is the beginnin'. Benny starts twice more in the semi-final spot, scorin' two quick knockouts, and is made a main eventer. In order he takes Joe De Barry, 'Cowboy' Larson, 'Denver Billy' Green and 'Tough Luck' Simonsky, thereby workin' himself to the top of the lightweight heap, with only one boy between him and a shot at the title—Harry 'Kid' Carter.

"Outa the six bouts, Benny has won four by clean kayos, one on a technical knockout, and one by a decision. Don't think I'm lettin' him go in there and shoot it out with all these tough babies just because he's got a tiger's temper. Nay, nay, neighbor! I got him in there boxin', mixin' hooks, jabs, uppercuts and shifts with his sockin', and what I mean, he can mix 'em. They's now no question in my mind whether he can take any boy of his weight in the world. You remember what a sensation he is? He's a fightin' machine.

"In the meantime, he's makin' his daily visits to Doc Steinmetz and gettin' his daily soakin' outa the old hokum bucket.

"'Funny the way that old tiger stuff gets in your system, ain't it?' he says to me one day. 'Funny. Say! I feel like bitin' somebody all the time. When you goin' to get Harry "Kid" Carter for me?'

"'I'll get him, don't worry. Mallory's workin' on him now, and all that's holdin' it up is whether it's an indoor or outdoor shot. "Dutch" Hoffman wants to stage it at the ball park.'

"'Jake,' says Benny. 'Only hustle it along. I'm wastin' to massacre that bird.'

"Fine talk for a buttercup, eh?

"The match is made a few days later, Wrigley Field bein' named as the settin' after Dutch Hoffman, Carter's manager, refuses to make it a indoor affair. Carter, of course, gets the long end of the purse—that's jake with us—but when Hoffman wants me to come through with five grand appearance money on top of the five grand the commission makes us post, I put up a squawk.

"'Listen,' I tells him, 'I don't get my jack outa a pump. I gotta post five grand appearance money and one grand weight forfeit with the commission. That's enough.'

"'Not for me,' Hoffman says. 'I ain't goin' to the expense of gettin' Carter in shape and then have you monkeys run out on me. You post that extra five grand with Mallory or there'll be no fight.'

"'Don't worry about nobody runnin' out on you,' says I, hot under the collar. 'We been chasin' you too long.'

"'I won't worry when you kick through with the jack,' he sneers.

"I was sure burned up, but I hadda put up that extra five grand before Hoffman'd close.

"I got three weeks to work with Benny after the match is made, and I ain't throwin' no nosegays at myself when I say that I bring him in in perfect shape. This Carter's one of them slam-bang boys which socks from bell to bell and can take a lotta cuffin' while he's at work. And he *can* sock. As a boxer, however, he don't go to the same school with Benny; our play is to box him.

"So I bring Benny along easy, workin' him for speed and usin' Sock McAuliffe and another fast feather as sparrin' pardners.

"'You'll make a monkey outa this Carter, Benny,' I tells him, 'if you'll go in there and box him. Work on him till you get the notice from me to tear in. Carter won't lay a glove a round on you, and by the fifth or sixth you should have him cut up and ready to take. Just don't let the tiger in you get loose until you get the nod from me.'

"'Oak,' says Benny. 'You're the doctor.'

"'Say,' says Sock, 'where do you get this tiger stuff?'

"'Never mind this tiger stuff,' I says.

"I don't have to tell you that I ain't anxious to wise the gang in Tin Ear Alley to the fact that I'm usin' psychology in the form of alleged tiger epiglottis extract and the old hokum bucket, on Benny. So far, I been able to keep it pretty well incognito, but Socks is hep, and they's a couple other boys around the Manhattan which has got their suspicion. I ain't worried about it particular, but I just as soon this buzzard Hoffman don't know nothin' about it, at that.

"Three or four days before the battle 'Creepy' Wilson tells me Carter ain't in shape. 'I ain't saw him work enough to know much about him,' Creepy says, 'but anybody can tell he ain't in shape. He looks like he's been playin' around.'

"I get the same dope from two other boys durin' the day, and that night Tom Mallory calls me over to his office. Dutch Hoffman's there.

"'Carter's hurt a bone in his hand,' Tom tells me, 'and Dutch wants to set the battle back a couple weeks. Is it jake with you?'

"'It is not,' says I. 'This baby makes me post an extra five grand appearance money on the side, and if Carter don't come in on schedule, I'm gonna collect, unless, of course, the commission's physician says he's got a bad hand.'

"Hoffman works himself into a lather, but I been serenaded by them kind of birds before, and he don't get no place with me.

"'Bring Carter down in the mornin',' Mallory tells Hoffman, 'and leave Doc Martin look at the hand.'

"'No,' says I. 'We'll get Doc Martin and have a look at the hand now. I'll sleep better with it off my mind.'

"'You cheap stiff,' Hoffman growls. 'Carter'll be in there on schedule and he'll take that hopped-up roller skater of yours so fast it'll make your head swim—bum hand an' all. You're a wise guy, eh?'

"'Not so wise, you rat,' I tells him. 'And not so dumb.'

"It's Creepy Wilson again which slips me the information that Hoffman is trying to get chummy with Sock McAuliffe. This is the day before the match.

"'I see Hoffman talkin' to him on the street yesterday after Sock leaves the gym,' says Creepy. 'And I see 'em eatin' together in a box at Marine Cafe last night.'

"'Sure,' Sock admits when I put him on the spot, 'I have dinner with him last night. Anything wrong with that?'

"'Not much,' I says. 'What's he takin' you to dinner for?'

"Sock grins. 'He wants to find out all he can about Benny. I guess Carter ain't in none too good shape.'

"'What'd you tell him?'

"'Don't be silly,' says Sock. 'I ain't no dumbbell.'

"When me and Benny and Doc Steinmetz gets out of a taxi at Wrigley Field the night of the battle, the bugs are lined up for a block fightin' for general admission seats, and they ain't a hundert reserve chairs left in the place.

"'That's the way you'll pack in the customers from here on,' I tell Benny.

"Benny don't have much to say while he's gettin' into his ring togs and I'm tapin' his hands. After the commissioner which has been watchin' me do the bandagin' goes out, Doc Steinmetz gives Benny a first edition line of tomato sauce, and I dope the bucket. Somebody knocks at the door pretty quick, and I put the bottle of alleged tiger epiglottis extract in my pocket. Then we all go out to the arena, Sock bringin' up the rear with the old hokum bucket.

"Benny's calm as a oyster through all the preliminaries. When the referee calls us to the center of the ring for instructions, he listens unconcerned to the end and then asts innocent: 'Do you want me to go to my own corner or the fartherest corner when I knock this pigeon down?'

"It's an old one but it works. Carter snarls, half drawin' back his right hand, and Benny grins.

"'A sweet champeen *you'd* make,' Benny tops it off.

"'Creepy's right about Carter—he ain't in shape. He looks soft; he ain't got no fat on him but he looks flabby. You know what I mean. And he acts dead on his feet.

"When he's back in his corner, Benny says: 'Gimme a shot of the tiger stuff.' I dip the sponge into the bucket and squeeze it out into his mouth as he's loosenin' his leg muscles, his back to the ring and his arms stretched out along the ropes.

"Carter comes out pretty fast at the bell at that, like he always does, and starts slammin'. Benny sticks a left hand in his face and slides away from him. Carter follows, throwin' punches from every angle with both hands. Benny slips a left, gets inside a right and hooks a left to Carter's right eye. He's out again before Carter has a chance to pull him into a clinch and go to work on his body.

"Carter manages to reach Benny's midriff with a left, and Benny hooks to the right eye again with his left. Then he shoots a short right to the face that starts the claret flowin'. Carter's tryin' to get in close, but Benny's too shifty for him. Benny nabs him a half dozen times with a left, most of 'em landin' on that right eye, while Carter's slingin' enough leather to of dented the side of the mint.

"Carter keeps rushin'. He can't catch Benny. Benny bombards him with more long lefts and rights. His left hand is in Carter's face so much it looks like it is tied there. A left hook opens up a cut over Carter's right eye, as Benny is forced into a corner where Carter counts with both hands to the body before Benny can get away.

"In the middle of the ring Benny starts throwin' punches, rockin' Carter's head with both hands and takin' a couple stiff body jolts himself. I holler at him and he grins and shifts away. Carter's eye is already bleedin' bad and the blood is botherin' him. Benny is playin' a tattoo with his left on the damaged glim at the close of the round.

"'You're makin' him look like a sucker,' I tell Benny as me and Creepy Wilson work over him. 'You look like a champeen. How d'ya feel?'

"'I don't know,' he tells me. 'My legs are wobbly and I feel sorta dizzy. That bird never copped me on the button, did he?'

"'No,' says I. 'He never come close to it. You'll be all right. Here. Take another shot of the old tiger's epiglottis.'

"I squeeze the sponge into Benny's mouth again and souse him over the head.

"'Take your time—box him,' I tell Benny as he goes out for the second. 'He can't hit you with a handful of shot, and you're cuttin' him to ribbons. I'll tell you when to tear in.'

"'No,' Benny says in a funny voice, 'he can't hit me.'

"Benny stumbles as he gets way from Carter's wild rush across the ring, and misses with a left. He misses with another left and Carter forces him into a clinch, workin' on his body with both hands.

"Benny stumbles again when Abe Ross, the referee, breaks 'em. Carter hooks a left to Benny's body and Benny shoots a right which lands on the top of Carter's head. Then he misses three times straight with a left jab, and Carter, workin' in, slams a hard right to the body and a harder left to the chin. Benny falls into a clinch in his own corner.

"'Keep away from him,' I hiss over the edge of the ring. He gives me a glassy stare, and he's got a bad case of sea-legs when Ross untangles him and Carter. The crowd's howlin' for Carter to keep comin'. They always do that when they see a boy's in bad shape. It don't make no difference which boy it is.

"Benny jabs with a left and misses Carter a foot. He starts a right for the body that wouldn't of parked if Carter's six feet across.

"For a minute Carter quits tearin' in and looks funny at Benny. Then he uncorks a left hook from the floor and parks it on Benny's chin. Benny don't try to block it. He just goes over backward like a sack of wheat.

"The count is up to five, and the pack is givin' the blood cry when Benny manages to get his elbows under him and half raises up. He shakes his head and looks around with a goofy expression on his pan. He tries to get his legs under him. They flop when he's got 'em halfway bent. His right elbow gives way and he falls on his face.

"He's layin' like that with his eyes wide open as he's counted out.

"We haven't got Benny to his corner before Doc Steinmetz is in the ring.

"'Somethin's wrong,' he says. 'Lay him out flat.'

"He bends over and puts his ear against Benny's left side. Then he gets his face down close to Benny's and takes a long breath.

"'Doped,' he says. 'Referee!'

"Ross comes over. 'Smell his breath,' says Steinmetz.

"Ross does it. 'Hyoscine,' he says comin' up. 'Ties 'em up in a knot and makes 'em wilder'n New Year's Eve.'

"'Where's his water bucket?' snaps Steinmetz.

"'Somebody's kicked it over.'

"'The hell they did,' says I, jumpin' over the ropes.

"No foolin'. Somebody has done that little thing. It's lyin' on its side back of Benny's corner. When I pick it up a spoonful of water runs out of a dent and trickles to the bottom. Doc pours it into a paper cup he gets from a pop boy.

"'Who kicked that bucket over?' I ast Sock.

"'Say!' he says. 'You don't think I—'

"'I don't think nothin', you little rat!' I says and takes a cut at him. He ducks and dives into the crowd.

"IT'S hyoscine all right. Doc gives the third degree to the spoonful we save outa the water bucket, and gets the answer. And don't think I don't have a fine time explaining things to the commission. If it hadn't of been for Doc Steinmetz and Abe Ross, them dumb birds would of sent me down for life. They ain't got no sympathy for psychology, whilst the tiger's epiglottis and the old hokum bucket is out with them. It takes Doc Steinmetz to explain that I been dopin' Benny with nothin' but plain water, and even then they try to find some rule to set me on my ear.

"We can't hang nothin' on Sock. He says he don't know nothin' about it, except that I put something in Benny's bucket in the dressin' room before we go out. However, if they is any question on the subject, I refer you to the fact that Sock is drivin' a new roadster ten days after obsequies has been said for Benny, and that he is now doin' his sockin' under the management of Dutch Hoffman. You can pay off on that—what?

"Where's Benny? Whatda you wanta bring *that* up for? A guy which should now be the lightweight champeen of the world blows his roll for a millinery shop in his home town of Waukeshaw, Wis., and is peddlin' chapeaux to chickens. He gets tipped off through the commission's hearing that he ain't got no tiger's temper and neither me or Doc can do anything with him. He averts to buttercup.

"And that's what psychology done for me.

"Say, Johnny, you don't know where I can pick me up a likely lookin' hundert twenty-six-pound boy?"

TRAPPER REDISCOVERS CENTURY-OLD FORT IN CANADA

OLD Fort Halkett, in the Liard River country, abandoned almost 100 years ago by the Hudson Bay Company, has been rediscovered by Allaire Delzell, a trapper, who has reached Telegraph Creek, B. C., from the river country. In the '80's an attempt was made by an expedition of the Geographical Survey to find the old post, but without success.

Delzell probably is the first white man to visit the place since the traders abandoned it a century ago. He found an old cabin, built of squared timbers, near a stretch of water called Fish Lake by the Indians. Inside the cabin was a quantity of powder and lead, as well as a number of ancient muskets. Parchment made from caribou skins covered the windows, but Delzell believes that the parchment was provided by the Indians, who apparently make use of the old fort from time to time. Delzell told of an exciting race between himself and a pack of twenty-six wolves. He was crossing the ice on Fish Lake when he saw the wolves approaching in fan formation. Unarmed, except for a .22 automatic pistol, he was compelled to roost in a tree for several hours until the wolves tired of waiting and went in search of easier prey.

FOR LOVE OF MIKE

By William P. Livengood

Pierre Le Borget races against treachery in the great Nome dog-sled Derby.

PIERRE LE BORGET was a dangerous man to have for an enemy. His nature had all the vaunted treacherous surliness of the half-breed. His body was immensely large and powerful. A rumor, which persisted in spite of Pierre's threats, hinted that when he was younger he had killed a man barehanded by breaking his back across a fallen log. He was not old yet—scarcely forty. His long, sinewy arms and powerful shoulders still held a world of strength. Plenty of men feared him.

But Big John McClaskey, the owner of the tireless dog teams which Pierre had swept to victory in the last three Derby races, felt only the same impersonal proprietorship in Pierre, the driver, that he did in the dogs themselves.

To McClaskey, the snarl which spread over Pierre's swarthy face when the dog owner told him the news, meant no more than did the snarl with which Mike, the lead dog in McClaskey's team of half-savage huskies, always greeted his owner. Big John was careful not to approach the dog unless Pierre was near. He half-envied the driver the manner in which he controlled the fierce brutes. Often he thought of Pierre almost as one of the dogs.

But of Pierre himself he was not afraid. He paid no attention to Pierre's writhing lips and clenched fist.

"Then me no drive dogs?" the half-breed spat savagely.

"No," repeated McClaskey. "I have engaged another man—Ben Miggins."

"Me no good enough to drive dogs?" Pierre declared bitterly.

"You are too big," asserted McClaskey. "It makes too much of a load for the dogs to pull."

'Me no ride?"

"That's just it. A lighter man can ride and make better time. That is why I hired Miggins."

Pierre stood up abruptly. He bent toward McClaskey. In the deep-set eyes of the breed, there burned a strange gleam —a gleam half-mad with passion. He thumped his breast with a sturdy finger.

"Me! I'll ween the race annyhow. Me

get some dogs! Me race! Me show!"

"You can drive my second team," proposed McClaskey.

"No," rasped the other. With another snarl which twisted his dark face horribly he strode from the room.

He went directly to the dogs. His eyes still held their angry glow. His lips moved and muttered. His hands clenched. Mike, the wolflike leader of the half-wild team, nuzzled against his back as he sat hunched against a cabin. One of the big hands reached out to maul the dog. For minutes they sat there side by side. Suddenly Pierre grasped Mike with both his hands and shook the dog savagely.

"Me beat you—you, Mike," he shot into the dog's teeth. "Me show you!"

That was a month before the entries went in. It was, also, the day before Ben Miggins reported to Big John. After the famous Miggins came, Pierre saw little of his former pals—the dogs of the racing team. For one reason, Miggins had the dogs out on the trail a lot of the time; and for another, Pierre was away, too, hunting for a team which he might run in the big race.

He found himself too late everywhere. All the owners of good teams had selected their drivers months before. Pierre plunged silently ahead seeking a team which he could drive. He even thought of buying dogs on time, and racing his own team. In the end, he was entered by Big John to drive a second team. Pierre did not know of the entry until it was in the hands of the race committee. When Big John told him, his anger flared again and he pointblank refused to accept.

But he did accept. It was his only chance to make good his threats. He would show them. He'd take this bunch of has-been and cast-off dogs and win the Derby.

The morning of the start dawned bright and cold. A few inches of snow had fallen the day before, covering the trail with a covering which would make the traveling harder than it would otherwise have been. That was a break for Pierre. His team had plenty of staying power. It was the speed which was lacking. Speed and coordination!

Pierre swung his team toward the starting line soon after sunup. The first team was to get away at seven-forty-five, with the others following at fifteen-minute intervals according to the order in which they had drawn their places. Pierre was to be the third to start. He drove slowly toward the main street of Nome. He was scowling bitterly. In one of the alleys he encountered Miggins with the big team. Mike waved a greeting with his tail—a mighty condescension from a husky. There were other men there besides Miggins. There was Pat Burton, the driver of the Fresco outfit from the western end of Alaska and also—Pierre recognized him with a start—Lumpy Spencer, the most crooked gambler in all Nome. As Pierre turned into the alley, he could have sworn money was being passed from one man to another.

There was no time to think of those things, though, for the race was about to begin. A pistol shot sent the first driver whirling down the street with whip cracking a merry accompaniment to the shouts of the rough men who lined the sides of the street and the sharp excited barks of the huskies! How much of that excess pep would be drained from those dogs before their four-hundred-mile trek was finished!

Fifteen minutes later the second sled shot away. Pierre brought his team to the starting line. He spoke to no one. His face was fixed. The pistol spoke. Pierre's big whip snapped. He was off.

"Me ween," he muttered to himself. "Me ween or Beeg John heem lose too."

So that was it. He would see that the team driven by Miggins would not win regardless of who else should win. He planned his race accordingly. He did not push his dogs when he reached the open country outside of Nome. About noon, a dog-sled passed him. It was that of the fellow who started next to Pierre. Pierre did not care that he had lost ground. He maintained his easy gait.

When he reached the stretch of trail where the descent into the woods took the trail from the wind-swept tundras, he examined his surroundings carefully. Sat-

isfied that he was right, he turned his leader off the trail and forced the team to pick their way down the steep, rock-covered slope. The regular trail ran along the mountainside for five miles more before it came down in a U-turn into the ravine below. Right on the turn was the first checking station.

Pierre by his daring in coming down the abrupt slope, cut off ten full miles of trail. He missed the checking station entirely but that was perfectly legal. The only station where he must report was the one at the halfway mark at Candle.

He passed two camps late that night. Other drivers had stopped for a few hours of rest. Pierre stopped, too, when he had found from the condition of the trail that there were no teams ahead of him. He had covered more than one hundred miles. But he had traveled all day and almost all night to do it.

He rested for three hours. At dawn he was again behind his sled, forcing the dogs ahead. None of the others had come up during the night. He must break trail through the few inches of feathery stuff on top of the old worn trail. That was no hard job. But it did take some time. During the morning, he noticed a team coming up behind him. It was Miggins. From the top of a ridge he watched Mike and the other huskies lunging along in the trail his own dogs had made.

At just the right moment as the team was kinked on a turn, Pierre whistled shrilly. Instantly Mike stopped dead in his tracks. The other dogs piled up on him. Pierre grinned as he contemplated the tangle of dogs and traces. He pushed ahead.

About noon, he tried the whistling trick again. Once more, the huskies behind him tangled themselves in their harness. He could see Miggins swing his heavy whip as he straightened the tangle. A look of pain crossed the breed's face momentarily.

Suddenly he dived into his sled and pulled out box after box of long-shanked, sharp-pointed tacks and hurled them as far from the trail as he could throw them. Those tacks he had packed for a dreadful purpose. They were to be dropped along the trail in the hope that the following teams might pick up the cruel barbs in their feet.

"Me no can do," Pierre murmured as he disposed of the last of the tacks. "Mike must no have sore feet."

After that there was no more whistling. Pierre settled down to strenuous racing. He was still ahead at the hundred-and-sixty-mile mark.

Then suddenly he found marks of another sled in the trail. It was the character of the outfit which first caught Pierre's attention, for it was a light sled, probably entirely unloaded—a racing sled. But whose? No one had passed him and there was no other trail by which they may have gone.

He turned in at the next checking station to learn the identity of the leader. "It's the Fresco bunch," the man at the telegraph instrument told him.

"No," objected the breed strenuously.

The operator paid no heed. He was busy tapping out the message of the race to the waiting world.

Pierre pushed on. Outside of Candle, Miggins caught up with him. Neither one stopped at the station for a rest. They merely registered, fed their dogs, and plunged ahead on the trail which led them back to Nome.

Miggins was ahead but he did not push his dogs to increase his advantage. He was satisfied to hold back the progress of the breed by holding to the center of the trail and refusing to let the other past him. Twice when Pierre pulled into the soft snow to go around, Miggins called on Mike for a bit of speed and the crack team easily kept the slower second team in their place.

The third time Pierre tried to pass he selected a place where the snow along the trail was harder. As he cut from the beaten trail, he whistled again with that shrill, piercing note he had used before. Again Mike stopped dead in his track. Before Miggins could get the team in motion, Pierre was past.

On and on. On and on. Pierre now held the trail. Miggins cursed and swore at his dogs and finally he took to the whip.

Pierre could hear the yelps of pain from the dogs as the lash cut their faces and ears.

He let Miggins past.

"Me keell you," he hissed as the other went by. "Me keell you ef you heet Mike once more."

"Dry up!" snapped Miggins with a snarl as he swished his whip in open defiance. Pierre's own lash cracked. The heavy cord struck like a live thing just at the spot where Miggin's parka collar protected his neck. Twice the lash wound round his neck, and ere it released itself Pierre with a mighty jerk tore Miggins from his feet, and laid him flat on his back in the snow. With one rip of his sinewy hand he tore the parka aside and grasped the throat of the fallen man.

"Now!" he gritted. He shook the lighter man like a terrier shakes a rat, before he hurled him a good six feet away. Miggins regained his feet in heavy silence, picked up his fallen whip and turned to his dogs. Pierre followed him. As daylight waned, Miggins began to look back at this man who trailed him so doggedly. They had been on the trail for hours.

Darkness came down and still they pushed ahead. Neither would make the move to halt until the stars showed the night was more than half gone. Then Pierre halted for a few hours of rest. Miggins pushed on for two miles more before he stopped.

Both were on the trail at daylight. Pierre looked eagerly for the tracks of the Fresco bunch. He hoped he had reduced the lead which the tracks which he had watched yesterday proved the invading team had held. Strangely, he could find no tracks whatever in the snow now.

But at noon, he came upon tracks of another team—came upon them suddenly. They came into the trail at right angles, and they were hours old. Pierre bent over them carefully.

"Eet ees not the same," he muttered. One dog has a nail gone!"

He leaped to his feet. Tempestuously he set out to catch Miggins. He performed that task so easily his suspicions were more aroused than ever.

"You see them track?" he demanded.

"Do you think I'm blind," snapped Miggins. "It's Burton and the Fresco dogs."

"No!" mocked Pierre knowingly. He saw Miggins clench his fist.

"You beeg bum," continued Pierre. "You no ween race!"

Miggins turned to his team.

"You crook," taunted Pierre. "You beeg crook. You t'row race. Pierre see you. Pierre know!"

With an angry cry, Miggins whirled, a naked knife blade gleaming in his hand. Pierre's whip sang, and Miggins' arm snapped to hurl the knife. But the whip was faster. It bit deep into the man's bare hand and brought a cry of pain from his lips. Pierre was on him in two big strides.

How he thrashed the man! With his open hand he smacked him across the face until Miggins begged for mercy. Then he stripped Ben of his weapons, tied his hands loosely and snapped his whip.

"Drive them dog," the breed commanded threateningly. "Drive them dog. Drive leek hell."

And again on and on. On and on. The Fresco outfit was easing along. Pierre could tell from the tracks that he and Miggins were gaining. He knew that Miggins realized it too.

Along in the afternoon, Miggins began to limp. He stopped shortly afterward.

"I'm all in," he announced. "I'm goin' to—

Pierre had come close. His whip cracked like a pistol shot not four inches from Miggin's face.

"Drive them dog," he reiterated. "Drive leek hell!"

They raced on for eight full hours more. It was night, but Pierre could tell by an occasional examination how close they were coming to the Fresco outfit. He had little fear that he would fail to catch Burton. He understood perfectly what had occurred.

The Fresco bunch coming in from the northwestern point of Alaska was comparatively unknown in Nome. They had put a team in the race. Another team which must have been very similar was

concealed about one hundred and fifty miles out from Nome. At a convenient point, the real team had swung away from the race course and cut across the narrow neck of snow to the return trail. Meanwhile the fake team went into Candle and reported there. Seventy miles further on, the fake team withdrew and Burton's team returned to the race. Miggins was probably involved only to the extent of following the Fresco outfit to cover the marks of ingress and outlet and probably to hold back the crack McClaskey dogs which had been the favorite in the betting. The conspirators had not counted on another driver being ahead of, or even with, the McClaskey outfit at this stage of the race.

"Me tell," Pierre hissed once to Miggins. "Me tell Beeg John. He geev you hell!"

"Tell him," snapped Miggins. "Nobody'll believe you. The records show Burton was at Candle. Big John will only laugh. They'll think it's an alibi."

A snap of the whip caused Miggins to discontinue his tirade.

Pierre pressed on doggedly. He did not worry particularly about catching Burton, in spite of the fact that the Fresco team was comparatively fresh and had a lead of several miles. He knew that Burton would not go into Nome far ahead of the record made by previous teams lest he excite suspicion. He knew too that Burton expected no opposition from behind, and was not hurrying. He was avoiding all the telegraph stations. So was Pierre.

On and on! And the Fresco tracks showing fresher hour by hour! By mid-afternoon, they were so close that Pierre could see bits of snow falling from the outline of the dog's tracks in the snow. The breed bound Miggins' hands more securely.

"Drive!" he snarled. "Drive like hell!"

An hour later they topped a ridge. Halfway down the other side was the Fresco sled. It wasn't a quarter of a mile away. Miggins let out a peculiar whistle. Pierre had forgot the very trick he had used himself. Burton turned to the ridge. There was no help for it now. Pierre could hide no longer. He yelled to Mike; then to the leader of his own team.

They flashed down the slope in the trail which Burton had made. Pierre expected Burton to call upon his dogs for a wild burst of speed. Instead the Fresco driver stood still. Apparently he sensed that all was not well and he awaited an explanation. He half-turned his outfit, completely blocking the trail. Miggins halted his dogs ten yards from Burton's team. With a quick glance to the rear to see where Pierre was, Miggins blurted out a warning.

"This here guy's wise to us," he called quickly.

Pierre pushed past him roughly. The breed still carried his long whip. Burton eyed him coldly. The Fresco driver was almost as big a man as Pierre himself, and he stood his ground fearlessly.

"Me know," the breed hissed. "Eef you feeneesh this race, me tell. You get hell, pretty queeck."

"Tell, will you?" mocked Burton. His hand swung to the pocket of his parka. Like a flash Pierre was at his throat. Blows were futile on account of the heavy parkas. Both knew that. And both men strove for the one sure hold on the other's throat. They fought like wild beasts for that hold.

For a time, Burton was on the offensive. Then as he realized the great strength of his opponent he suddenly saved his strength as much as possible in the hope of wearing out Pierre and thereby making the contest more equal. But the breed knew no let-up. His great arms pawed for a grip on the other man. Once he caught Burton off balance and the Fresco driver went down on one knee. He was up in a moment, but Pierre had a grip about his waist. Slowly and surely the breed pushed the other fellow's head back and back. Then with a savage twist he threw him to the snow-covered ground. With one knee grinding into Burton's stomach he pinned him there. Like a flash one of his hands searched out the pocket of Burton's parka. It came out clutching an automatic pistol. For an in-

stant, Pierre thought of using it for he pressed the barrel deliberately against Burton's head. The Fresco driver ceased to struggle abruptly, as he felt the cold steel.

Pierre looked down on him with utter contempt. With an oath he hurled the gun far out into the snow. A snarl of rage was still on his swarthy face. He had not had mercy. He simply chose another way.

He ripped open the collar of the fallen man's parka. Both of Burton's hands covered his own throat for protection. Pierre's knee still ground with punishing force into his mid-section. The breed grasped Burton's hands at the wrists to tear them away so he could sink his clutching fingers into his throat. Something warned him to turn around. He half-whirled. And it was well for him, he did.

Little Miggins had come up behind him. The man's hands were still bound, but he had turned his whip and with the heavy butt end he aimed a savage blow at Pierre's head. If the breed had not moved, the blow would have knocked him unconscious—would probable have killed him. As it was it glanced off his head with force enough to knock him sprawling from his place. He fell half-dazed in the snow beside Burton.

Before he could recover, both men were on him.

"Kill him," hissed Miggins. "It's the only way."

"I'll kill him, all right," snorted Burton. "I'll kill him the way he'd have killed me."

He clutched for Pierre's throat. The breed was but half-conscious. He had sense enough to realize his predicament but not strength enough to resist. It looked bad for him.

And then! Then a great gray shape flashed before his eyes.

"Mike," he called. "Good old Mike."

In another instant he was under a mass of tangled dogs and harness for Mike had dragged the whole team with him in his rush to help his master. Somehow Pierre pulled himself clear with no more serious injury than scratches and a torn parka. What he saw brought him to his senses in a flash.

Burton was down, and Mike was at his throat ripping savagely with those great wolflike teeth. Miggins was trying to beat off the dog in vain.

"Mike," shouted Pierre roughly. "Mike. Get the hell back!"

Somehow he got the dog away before it tore Burton's jugular; somehow he resisted the impulse to finish what the dog began. Contemptuously he spat into Burton's face. And Burton made no response to the insult.

"Eef you feeneesh een the money, me tell," warned Pierre darkly as he cracked his whip over his dogs. "Get goin', Miggins! Hey, you Mike! Mush! Mush!"

The cannon at Fort Davis boomed twice as they came in sight. Four miles away in Nome, Pierre could picture the crowd sweeping out from the hotels to be at the finish. And two shots! Two teams coming! A hot finish! He yelled for Miggins to halt, enforcing his command with a pistol-like snap of the whip. Miggins stopped.

Pierre drove his team past Mike and his mates before he cut the bonds from Miggins' wrists. He did not speak. Neither did Miggins.

They took up their trek again. Only now Pierre's outfit was ahead. It could not be said they were breaking trail, for here the trail was open. They trotted into the outskirts of Nome. Just around the corner was the main street and the crowd.

Pierre turned to look at Mike.

"Ah, Mike," he murmured. "You one damn fine dog. You bes' dog in Alaska. You ought to ween."

He turned back to his own team with a slashing crack of his whip. "Mush," he cried.

Then, as suddenly, he changed his mind. "Whoa," he countermanded coarsely.

He turned to Mike. "Mush, Mike! Mush!"

The old lead dog trotted past him, Pierre leaned over and touched his plumy tail as he went. But as Miggins, running behind the team, went by, the breed scowled fearfully.

"Me keel you sometime," he hissed.

KILLER KANE'S BOAST

By James W. Egan

Mark Badger plays a hand in "Hell" Junction with a man who "wouldn't be taken alive."

"I'LL never be taken alive! I'll get any man who comes after me!"

This is what Abel Kane, better known as "Killer" Kane, had hissed in the ears of Jailer Gaisford on the night of his escape from the county calaboose at Silver Summit. Gaisford, covered by his own gun, remembered distinctly the young desperado's boast. It was all he remembered, as a moment later he was brutally knocked in the head.

Killer Kane was reputed a very bad hombre. He had been awaiting trial on a charge of murder. During a drunken row in the small, nearby community of Mica City he had shot a quarrelsome miner to death. Rumor had it this was not the first slaying of which Kane was guilty. Throughout Montana and Idaho he was acknowledged as a "killer." Hence his grisly nickname.

Just how Kane had managed to trick the night turnkey to his cell was hard to understand; but somehow he had done it, managed to take away Gaisford's six-shooter and keys, and hammer him into insensibility. Weeks passed before the jailer fully recovered from the terrific beating administered.

Several hours elapsed before the break was discovered. Then Sheriff Luke Desmond promptly mustered a posse and started scouring the mountainous country about Silver Summit for the escaped murderer. The man-hunters were unable to find a trace of Killer Kane. Thorough search of his old haunts in Mica City revealed only that he could not have fled thither.

A week went by with the young desperado still at large. It began to appear as if he would not be taken alive—in fact, taken at all.

Sheriff Desmond, baffled, dismissed his posse. He was ready to confess himself outwitted when a long message arrived from northern Montana. The Silver Summit official, of course, had notified every other guardian of the peace in the state to be on the lookout for Kane. Perusal of the wire brought a brighter expression to Desmond's face than he had worn for days.

Telegram in hand, the sheriff stepped from his private cubbyhole into the larger outer office. Two of his deputies, Hough and Freeman, were gathered amusedly around a sturdy, gray-haired man of between forty-five and fifty. The latter was entertaining them with his manipulation of a deck of cards in several simple but dexterous sleight-of-hand tricks.

At sight of this grizzled individual Luke Desmond's expression grew even more cheerful.

"By Golly! I'm glad tuh see yuh, Mark!" he exclaimed. "How's the leg? Is it ready tuh let yuh come back on the job?"

Mark Badger grinned.

"Reckon so, Luke. I got a little limp yet, but I can manage. Was just goin' in tuh report for duty in a minute or two."

The veteran Badger was the sheriff's most trusted aide. A few weeks previously he had been shot through the left leg in a revolver duel with a Silver Summit divekeeper whom, however, he had captured. Naturally, he had not participated in the hunt for Killer Kane.

"Well, I'm plum' glad tuh have yuh on hand, Mark," said the sheriff. "What was yuh doin' with them cards? Never knew yuh could juggle pasteboards thataway."

Badger grinned again.

"Had tuh do somethin' tuh pass time while I was laid up, Luke. When I was a young hombre I usta be fair tuh middlin' at palmin' coins and cards and I been practicin' up again for the fun uh it. I was showin' the boys here the hand's quicker'n the eye."

"I know yuhr hand ain't slow in gettin' out a gun—it's been quicker'n many a eye, Mark," complimented Desmond. "Come inside. I got somethin' tuh palaver over with yuh."

The veteran followed his superior into the cubbyhole. The men seated themselves.

"Uh course yuh know, Mark," began the sheriff, "we been scramblin' around these hills for Killer Kane all week without no luck?"

Badger nodded.

"Been kinda wishin' I was here tuh go after that jasper m'self, Luke."

"They ain't nobody I'd rather see on his trail, Mark. And I think yuh're goin' tuh get yuhr chance. I just received a pretty hot tip this mornin'."

"What is it, Luke?" he asked eagerly.

"I got a wire here from a hombre named Yoder. He's the marshal at that town up in northern Montana called Hull Junction. Yuh've heard uh it, Mark."

"Yuh mean the burg gener'ly known as 'Hell' Junction? It's just about the roughest, toughest, widest open town in the state. Loaded tuh the brim with gamblers, gunmen, law dodgers and scoundrels from both sides uh the border. I ain't never been there, but I got a idee what it's like. So that's where Killer Kane is? He oughta feel at home!"

"Hell Junction would be a plum' suitable place for Kane tuh light, Mark. Yoder has spotted a jasper he thinks might be him. The description he sends fits pretty good."

"What's this Yoder's plan? Tuh grab the suspect and hold him for us?"

Desmond smiled grimly.

"It seems not. Marshal Yoder is either a sort uh weak sister or he knows his Hell Junction. He figures I better send somebody up there tuh see if the suspect is Killer Kane. If so, some scheme'll have tuh be worked out tuh trick Kane intuh the open where yuh can arrest him and get away with it. That's Yoder's size-up uh the situation."

"I'm anxious tuh tackle the job, Luke!"

"Yuh know what Kane boasted tuh Gaisford before he cracked him, don't yuh, Mark? That's about all we been able tuh get outa poor old Jerry so far."

"Uh huh! That he won't be taken alive and he'll get anyone who comes after him. We'll see."

"I believe yuh can take him if any man can, Mark. Don't forget, though, he's a desperate, dangerous youngster. He's fast with a gun—not as fast as you, prob'ly, but plenty quick—and I hear he can handle a knife plum' skillful."

"I never laid eyes on him, uh course, but I figure he's a hard handful," said

the grizzled deputy. "I just wonder how he got his reputation as a killer? Through shootin' hombres off guard or by givin' 'em a chance and beatin' 'em tuh the draw?"

"Well, some uh his friends in Mica City claim he shot that fellow Grindle in self-defense—or, anyway, that they both drew and Kane proved quicker on the trigger."

"Uh-huh. You want me tuh light out for Hell Junction right away, I s'pose?"

"If yuh feel like yuhr leg's all right, Mark. I know yuh're the man tuh handle this. Yuh're an old gunfighter, and yuh been in Montana since it was a frontier. Yuh can take good care uh yuhrself in tough towns. Besides, yuh're the one man in this office Killer Kane don't know. Yuh was laid up when he was brought in from Mica City, and yuh ain't been in that town since he drifted intuh this neck uh the woods, near's I recall."

"Far's I know, Luke, we ain't never laid eyes on each other."

"Yuh'll be able tuh identify him, Mark. We mugged Killer Kane and got a damn good likeness. Yuh got any scheme uh campaign in mind? Long's yuh'll be playin' a lone hand yuh'll have tuh watch yuhr step. And don't forget the boast he made."

"I won't!" asserted Mark Badger. He was lost in thought for a few moments. At length he spoke.

"Luke, I got a idee. Listen tuh this!"

Briefly the gray-haired veteran outlined his proposed plan of action. The sheriff inclined his head in approval.

"Sounds good, Mark. Yuh'll have tuh outwit Kane in some way. By tuh-morrow evenin' yuh should be in Hull—or Hell—Junction. I'll fix yuh up with expense money and get the authority tuh enable yuh tuh make the arrest."

A GRIZZLED, cool-eyed individual whose dress was faintly reminiscent of the old-type Western gambler stood at the bar—a genuine bar—of the Hot Spot, Hull Junction's largest emporium of sin.

Studying the place and its crowd as he dallied with a glass of exceedingly raw whiskey, Mark Badger admitted the Hot Spot was as tough a joint as a man could wish to invade. The two unaproned men behind the bar were husky plug-uglies. The majority of patrons had vicious, dissipated countenances. Nearly all of them wore guns openly. Even the painted women of the dance hall section were a hard-looking lot.

"The ideal hangout for a killer," thought the veteran deputy.

As yet Badger had seen no one resembling the fugitive Kane. He had not tried, during his short stay in Hull Junction, to get in touch with Marshal Yoder. Desmond had wired that official he was sending a representative under cover. In the rôle Badger had chosen to assume it was imperative no hint of a possible connection with the law be suspected. So carefully had the veteran planned, that he had not come into Hell Junction by rail. He had gone on with the train to Stark, next town to the north. At Stark he secured a good horse and traveled back to this lawless community.

After a struggle to keep his face straight, Badger finally downed his drink of whiskey. He was depositing the glass on the damp bar when a new arrival pushed into the Hot Spot. A young man, slim, dark haired, with sullen black eyes and a good-looking, sensual face still showing traces of pallor.

Mark Badger's pulse quickened. Beyond a doubt, he was gazing upon Killer Kane. The young man was the image of the picture in the sheriff's gallery at Silver Summit.

The grizzled officer betrayed nothing of his inward exultation. He continued to lean against the bar while the fugitive wandered restlessly to the edge of the dance floor.

Apparently finding little to attract him there, Kane walked over to a deserted card table, picked up a deck of pasteboards and began shuffling them aimlessly.

Badger waited a few moments. He strolled over to where his quarry sat.

"Like tuh play a little stud?" he queried casually.

Killer Kane glanced up sharply.

"No!" The tone was surly.

Uninvited, Badger dropped into a chair opposite the young man.

"Mind lettin' me have that deck?" he said. "Mebbe I can show yuh some stunts yuh ain't seen."

Kane started to snap something, but caught himself and checked the words. He threw over the cards.

With the other's black, forbidding eyes upon him, Badger commenced his routine of sleight-of-hand tricks. He made the pastebords vanish and reappear at will; even picked them from the air.

"Yuh're slick, hombre," grudgingly admitted Kane. "I'd be a damn fool tuh play yuh stud or anythin' else."

"Oh, no!" Badger grinned slightly. "When it comes tuh gamblin' for money I'm plum' honest!"

"Yeh; the world's just full uh honest card slickers," the young man sneered.

"Anyhow, gamblin' ain't a business with me no more," continued the veteran, flipping the cards. "I play oney for fun when I play. Thought I'd see if I was gettin' rusty."

Kane did not respond. Several interested bystanders crowded around the table. Among these spectators Mark Badger perceived a small man whose dark, scabby visage somehow seemed familiar. But the old frontiersman could not place him. Momentarily he was disturbed. There was no evidence, however, that the scabby person knew him.

After doing a couple of additional tricks Badger laid down the cards. He arose to his feet.

"Have a drink?" he asked.

"No" was the curt reply.

Shrugging his broad shoulders, Badger moved toward the bar. A number of the Hot Spot's patrons gathered around him, requested further exhibitions of legerdemain. The husky bartenders showed a flattering interest.

The grizzled deputy went through his simple repertoire again. Following the performance, one of the men behind the bar set up a round of drinks. This big fellow, Badger discovered, was Jack Girton, manager of the Hot Spot.

During his manipulation of the cards Badger had been unable to watch Killer Kane. Not until Girton commanded the whiskey served was he given an opportunity to look around for his quarry. He found the young man had departed quietly from the Hot Spot.

As soon as he could, Badger slipped out. He visited various others of Hell Junction's dives. Kane was in none of them.

Nevertheless, the deputy retired to rest that night not greatly worried. He believed the fugitive did not suspect his real identity, but merely distrusted every stranger as a matter of course.

Badger spent most of the next day around the Hot Spot. He became on quite friendly terms with the ugly manager, Girton.

"Seems tuh me," hinted the latter, "yuh killed a chance tuh clean up on the gamblers 'round here by showin' off them tricks, Wells." For his sojourn in Hell Junction the deputy had adopted the name of Ben Wells.

"I ain't gamblin' for a livin' nowadays, Jack," Mark Badger grinned. "So I amuse m'self occasionally by palmin' the pasteboards for practice. I'm oney goin' tuh be in town long enough—"

Purposely he stopped short.

"Go ahead, Wells." Girton smiled crookedly. "If it's a secret I can keep it. I'm keepin' a lot uh them!"

"I reckon mebbe yuh could help me out, Jack," Badger said, as if coming to a sudden decision. "My chief business in Hell Junction is tuh get hold uh a gunfighter—a jasper who can really shoot, and shoot tuh kill!"

"Huh! Hell Junction's lousy with gunfighters, Wells!"

"Yuh mean they think they're gun handlers!" the veteran snorted impatiently. "I ain't lookin' for no imitation badman, Jack. The outfit I'm with goes in for big game—and dangerous! We lost a good man last week and he's gotta be replaced by a jasper who can't be scared by nothin' this side uh hell! And I don't mind sayin' the stakes ain't tuh be sneezed at by nobody!"

Jack Girton's eyes narrowed.

"Yuh want somethin' special in the way

uh a gunman, do yuh? I reckon I know yuhr man, Wells. He can handle a gun and he's tough as they make 'em. Yuh recolleck that black-eyed young hombre who was in here last night? He's a killer, Wells!"

"I noticed him, I think," impassively.

"Yuh won't find a nervier jasper in the Hot Spot! And I happen tuh know Blackie's ripe for anythin' right now!"

"Uh-huh!" Badger remarked. "Reckon mebbe I better have a palaver with this Blackie, Jack."

"He'll be in here tuh-night. I'll help yuh get tuhgether, Wells. I got a little private office up over the dance hall where yuh won't be bothered."

"That's fine, Jack. I'm much obliged!"

The grizzled officer felt he was making excellent progress. Through the manager of the Hot Spot he was being thrown in contact with Killer Kane exactly as he desired. Half the battle already was won.

Jack Girton was as good as his promise. Shortly after eight o'clock that evening, when the Hot Spot was beginning to grow rough and noisy, Mark Badger found himself in the tiny office above the dance hall with the sullen-eyed Kane. The manager was just leaving them.

"Wells has somethin' tuh talk over with yuh, Blackie," he said. "I figured yuh'd be better off here by yuhrselves."

"What yuh got on yuhr chest?" growled the fugitive, when Girton had gone. It was plain, however, the young man trusted the boss of the dive. He seemed curious, rather than suspicious.

"Had no idee yuh might be the hombre I'm lookin' for when I set down across from yuh last night," Badger observed, easily. "If yuh're all Jack says, I can put yuh in the way uh some real money."

Already a swift glance around the small room had shown the deputy the only exit was by the way they had come. He gave up a wild idea of attempting to overpower Kane and drag him through that lawless mob below. Such action would be foolhardy. His original plan appeared far the better.

"As I told Jack tuh-day," continued Badger. "I want a gunfighter who ain't afraid uh nothin' this side uh hell. I represent a outfit what plays for high stakes and we shoot tuh kill when we have tuh!"

Killer Kane listened with frowning attention.

"Whose outfit is this yuh speak about?" he demanded. "Are yuh headin' it?"

"No," promptly. "I'm actin' for the big chief. I can't tell yuh his name, but he's goin' tuh be in Stark the next coupla days. Uh course, all I can do is take yuh tuh him, Blackie. He's gotta look yuh over and be satisfied. The outfit just lost a damn good member and the chief's apt tuh be finicky about the man takin' his place."

Kane smiled scornfully.

"I reckon if yuh and yuhr chief knowed who I was yuh wouldn't worry about me stackin' up," he asserted. "But I ain't givin' that away now. Blackie'll be name enough. What business is yuhr outfit in, Wells?"

Mark Badger dropped his voice.

"Mostly bringin' forbidden cargo across the border from Canada," he answered.

"Booze?"

"No. It's bigger game. Aliens!"

"Yuh mean slippin' foreigners intuh the country?"

"That's it, Blackie! Damn risky, but it's got the booze racket cheated for profit. Uh course, we're buckin' Uncle Sam and we can't afford tuh get caught, yuh understand. In a pinch, we shoot our way out."

"I see." Killer Kane's eyes gleamed. "Well, they's nothin' I like better'n pluggin' anybody what wears a badge! I reckon I'd be glad tuh talk with yuhr chief."

"Why not ride up tuh Stark with me tuh-morrow and meet him? Yuh got a horse, Blackie?"

"I can get hold uh a bronc."

"Then suppose yuh meet me here at the Hot Spot about noon? Stark ain't more'n a coupla hours' ride. We'll have plenty uh time tuh talk with the big boss."

This arrangement agreed upon, the pair returned to the boisterous atmosphere below. Kane entered a stud poker game. Mark Badger displayed his line of card

tricks for some of Jack Girton's friends.

The grizzled officer was in high good humor. So far his plan had worked without a hitch. Killer Kane had fallen into the trap, which Jack Girton unwittingly had helped prepare. Badger hoped to reach Stark on the morrow with the young slayer his prisoner.

The veteran decided he would play out his hand alone. He had not communicated with Marshal Yoder while in Hell Junction. Nor did he intend to jeopardize his scheme now by doing so. It was running too great a hazard. And he had an idea Yoder would be of precious little assistance in a tight place, anyway.

THE following noon Badger dismounted from his powerful chestnut and entered the Hot Spot. Killer Kane already was present. Several idlers were hanging around. Among them the officer again noted the man with the dark, scabby visage.

"Got a horse, I see," Badger greeted his quarry. He had perceived a strange gray hitched in front of the dive.

"Yeh," replied the young man. "Crowbait, but he oughta get me tuh Stark."

"What d'yuh say we have a drink before startin' out?"

Badger nodded at Girton's husky assistant behind the bar.

As the whiskey was set before the two men someone stepped up softly behind them. With a sudden move he snatched the guns from the holsters of each.

"Hands up, boys!" came the chuckling command.

Grinning faintly, Mark Badger wheeled. In the bar mirror he had glimpsed Jack Girton sneaking toward them, a playful smile on his homely face.

Killer Kane did not grin as he turned. Even on recognition of the divekeeper he scowled.

"What the hell's comin' off?" he snapped.

Girton's chuckle broadened.

"It's all right, boys. I just wanted tuh see if yuh was woke up this early in the day."

He balanced the guns in his large hands.

"Nice-lookin' shootin' irons. Golly, yuh can't tell 'em apart, hardly! Blackie's sure got the twin tuh yuhr gun, Wells! But I guess I better hand 'em back before yuh both climb my frame."

Girton thrust the two guns at Badger. The gray-haired deputy held them momentarily.

"They are alike," he observed. "Blue-barreled Colt forty-fours. I got a little mark scratched on the butt uh mine, though. Here's yuhr hardware, Blackie."

Still scowling and holding a glass of liquor in his hand, Kane shoved the gun back into its holster.

"Yuh want tuh be careful about playin' damn fool tricks like that, Girton," he exclaimed huffily.

"Never mind, Blackie," soothed the manager of the Hot Spot. "I'll set up the drinks tuh show yuh I mean well."

Badger did not desire the second dose of raw whiskey, but he got rid of it with simulated satisfaction. Killer Kane gulped his greedily.

The pair started from the Hot Spot with the officer in the lead. As Kane followed, the dark, scabby individual came up abruptly and grabbed his sleeve. He whined something in a low tone.

"I'll be with yuh in a jiffy, Wells." The young man stopped in apparent displeasure.

Mark Badger was a trifle disturbed as he lifted into the saddle. Perhaps two minutes elapsed before Kane rejoined him, his face hard and grim.

"Damn jasper!" escaped him as he swung onto the gray. "I owe him a few bucks and he thought it was gettin' away from him!"

This seemed a reasonable explanation. Badger experienced a sense of relief. Yet he remained wary, alert, as they jogged out of Hell Junction.

The winding, little-traveled road to Stark penetrated a hilly, lonesome region. There were long stretches without evidence of human habitation. Somewhere along this route Mark Badger planned to get the drop on Killer Kane. His brain worked busily. He wanted to capture the murderer alive, if possible.

At the end of a half hour the last of Hell Junction had vanished from view. Badger's chestnut was ahead. It placed the deputy at a disadvantage of which he was well aware. He wondered how he could fall behind the gray without making the action appear too obvious.

Suddenly Badger heard the young man pull up short. He turned. Kane was dismounting. His horse between the officer and himself, he looked to be tugging at the saddle.

"Damn cinch is loose!" Kane shouted.

Possibly this was his opportunity. Badger was anxious to bring matters to a head, anyway. He swung to the ground. His hand was darting toward his six-shooter when a menacing bark halted him:

"No, yuh don't, Mister Badger! Raise 'em up and keep 'em up!"

Revolver drawn and cocked, Killer Kane whisked around from the shelter of the gray. His face was savage.

Reluctantly Mark Badger reached skyward.

"Yuh're pretty slick and so's Sheriff Desmond," spat out the killer, "but not slick enough! Goin' tuh get me away from my friends in Hell Junction and take me by su'prise, huh? I reckon I'd been fallin' blindly intuh yuhr trap if it wasn't for Scabby Face back there in the Hot Spot. He was bagged once in Silver Summit. He remembered yuh, Badger, and couldn't figure what I was doin' with yuh. When he tipped me off I decided tuh play a little game m'self. So yuh was goin' tuh bring me tuh the chief at Stark, was yuh? Desmond, prob'ly. But yuh'll never fool nobody else!"

Too late Badger understood why that dark, repulsive visage had seemed familiar.

"I guess I overlooked a bet, Kane," he remarked, coolly.

Desperate as was his position, his mind was active. It was a characteristic of Mark Badger he could remain calm and collected in the face of grave danger.

"Yuh know what I said when I broke outa jail," boasted the killer. "I wouldn't be taken alive, and I'd get any man who come after me. Badger, I told yuh they was nothin' I liked better'n pluggin' anybody wearin' a badge!"

The old man played for every precious second.

"I reckon yuh got the drop on me, Kane. Yuh can shoot me down in cold blood. But that won't be nothin' tuh brag about. I been told yuh always give the other fellow a chance—that yuh did in Mica City. Ain't yuh goin' give me that chance for my life?"

"Like hell I am!" Killer Kane's finger tightened on the trigger. "Yuh damn trickster, I'm goin' tuh leave yuhr carcass for the buzzards!"

A bleak grin flickered on the hard lips.

"I reckon, Badger, yuh should never have let my gun outa yuhr hands when yuh had it back there in the Hot Spot. But tuh hell with this talk! I. . . ."

Killer Kane stopped. He was amazed to see a grin lighting up Badger's own countenance.

"Yuh're a damn fool, Kane!" said the grizzled veteran. "All men uh yuhr stripe is. Yuh call me tricky. Mebbe I'm a mite trickier than yuh realize. Did yuh know I bet Jack Girton ten bucks he couldn't take our guns away from us without a fuss? I owe him the ten. He took the guns and put 'em in my hands. I'm clever with my hands, Kane!"

"What the hell are yuh drivin' at?" The other was unable to hide a note of uneasiness.

"I'm sayin' it wasn't no trick for me tuh switch the guns when I got 'em from Girton. Yuh got my gun, which looks so much like yuhr own. That gun, with the mark on the butt, yuh're pointin' at me now. It's a very good gun, Kane—*only I loaded it beforehand with blank shells!*"

The killer's features were convulsed with rage and dismay.

"Damn yuh! Yuh're lyin' and I know it!"

But he did not know it. Mark Badger's manner was altogether too assured. The badly perturbed young man jerked up his weapon to peer into its six chambers. For a second or two he quite forgot the officer never had been disarmed.

In that fraction of time given him, Badger acted. His hand flashed down to his holster. Almost instantaneously his gun was out and barking.

Rapid as was the draw, hasty as was the shot, the lead struck flesh and bone. Through the killer's upraised forearm tore the bullet.

Kane staggered back, the forty-four falling from his clutch.

Badger advanced toward him.

"Yuh're my prisoner, Kane!"

The wounded man bared his teeth like a wild beast. He plunged his left hand inside his shirt. It came forth with a knife.

"Yuh'll never take me alive!" he vowed.

Mark Badger's finger hesitated on the trigger. He could have shot the other down, but he was stubbornly determined to return with a living prisoner.

Brandishing his blade, the young desperado snarled defiance. He crouched, as if about to lunge.

Badger did not shoot. He had thought of a better way. He grasped his heavy Colt by the barrel. He hurled it with all his strength. At such short range he could not miss. The butt of the weapon caught Killer Kane in the solar plexus. The young man doubled up with an agonized gasp.

Long before he had recovered from that terrible paralyzing blow, Mark Badger had Killer Kane secure.

SHERIFF LUKE DESMOND sat in his private cubbyhole, gazing upon his grizzled deputy with open admiration.

"So Killer Kane didn't get the man who came after him, and he was taken alive—that much for his boast, Mark! Yuh ole slicker! Imagine yuh bein' cunnin' enough tuh switch guns on Kane in that Hot Spot joint and pass over yuhr own Colt filled with blanks! Did yuh really make the bet with Girton in order tuh work it? A plum' nervy and smart trick, Mark. But just suppose yuh hadn't been able tuh trade six-shooters? What a damn tight fix yuh'd been in on the road."

The old frontiersman did not return the sheriff's grin.

"When death stares yuh in the face, Luke," he said slowly, "yuh think with all yuh got. I was grabbin' at any straws what come along. No, I never made no bet with Jack Girton. He was just bein' playful when he grabbed the guns—but his bit uh foolin' saved my ancient hide. That and the fact Kane knowed I was slick with my hands. I played my best—and most desperate—trick out there on the Stark road, Luke!

"And it was a trick. More uh a trick than I first let on, Luke. It wasn't my gun at all Kane was holdin'. I never made no switch at the Hot Spot. *He was coverin' me with his own forty-four, Luke, and, just like mine, it was loaded with real lead!*"

THE LOST CABIN MINE

IN the spring of 1863, Allen Hulburt with two men named Jones and Cox left Walla Walla, Washington, on a prospecting trip, with six horses and a month's supply of provisions. Somewhere in the Bighorn Mountains they located what is stated to have been the richest placer deposit ever uncovered, panning a dollar to the pan and more.

For some time they worked the deposit, and when cold weather closed in whipsawed lumber, building themselves a cabin with a stockade around it and preparing for the winter. With the coming of spring they again panned the gold, but were interrupted by Indians. Cox and Jones were killed, but Hulburt escaped.

He managed to secure a pack of provisions and some of the gold. After traveling for forty-five days he reached the old Reshaw bridge, three miles west of where Casper, Wyoming, is now located. There he met a large party of gold seekers on a stampede to the reported rich finds on Grasshopper and Alder Creeks, in Montana.

After he had shown them the gold he brought out, more than five hundred men with their women, children and one hundred and fifty wagons prevailed on him to lead them to the diggings. They started, and Hulburt soon realized that he did not know where the mine was; that he had lost his bearings during the forty-five days of his wanderings after escaping from the Indians. After three or four months the attempt was given up.

This place afterwards became famous as the Lost Cabin Mine. Many different men have hunted for it but without success.

CONFIDENCE

By

J. R. Johnston

Crossed forks of gun-lightning burn a sheriff-killer with the brand of death.

NO brass band blared forth martial music as the mild appearing man on the pinto horse rode into Holdenville. No reception committee waited at the end of the narrow, dusty street to welcome him with open arms and flowery phrases. Without the slightest doubt, had there been, young Art Miller would have gone far out of his way to avoid them. Not that he was in any way under the ban of the law. He was merely a bashful and modest young man who had no use whatever for the limelight as it concerned himself.

To look at him, no one in the world would so much as imagine that here was a living, breathing substantiation of that trite old adage, "Appearances are deceiving." He was scarcely twenty-two, tall and lean of form, with features that were almost womanish. Yet, if one looked closely and shrewdly, he might discern the light of purposeful determination in the mild blue eyes, the confident, but not boastful carriage of the slender form. From broad-brimmed sombrero to booted, spurred heels, Art Miller was to all outward appearances only a green, inexperienced cowboy from some tiny insignificant ranch back in the hills. But if some bold soul took for granted that the holstered forty-five on the young man's right hip was nothing but an ornament, and chose to presume on such an assumption, he would speedily and painfully have been undeceived.

Whether or not a reception committee would actually have astounded Miller, certainly the scene that greeted him as he reined in before the unpainted frame shack labeled "Holdenville Bank" was calculated to create intense susprise in the breast of even the hardiest beholder. There was reason enough.

In the center of the street two men faced each other with hate and rage mirrored in their eyes. One was tall and well built, clean shaven, and on the left side of his open vest a silver star glistened in the morning sun. The other was shorter and much stockier, his coarse features and the perpetual sneer on his thick lips setting him apart from the common herd in a country where rough, rugged men pre-

dominated. His body was half crouched, tensed; the singular posture of the gunman, recognizable the world over. Both men were dressed according to the rangeland custom, as were most of the citizens watching from the comparative safety of doors and windows along the street.

"I'm tellin' you straight, Baur," gritted the man with the star, "you can't get away with the things you've been doin' any longer! As long as I'm marshal of this town you walk a mighty narrow trail, you hear me? Don't think you can put anythin' over on me, either. I know you! You're just an ornery, low-down horse thief and murderer, and I'm tellin' you so right to your face!"

A man in the doorway of the bank behind Miller gasped aloud.

"That finishes Galoway," he observed to no one in particular with supreme conviction. "Yep, he's sure done for. The dang fool!"

Miller watched curiously, wonderingly. The two actors in the little drama were close together, the marshal standing straight and tensed, Baur in the same characteristic half crouch, tanned right hand hovering above the black butt of the holstered revolver on his thigh. His words, though low voiced, reached Miller clearly.

"You're a liar, Galoway!" he spat tersely. "A dirty, stinkin' liar!"

Like the strike of an infuriated rattlesnake Galoway lashed out with a hard-balled fist straight from the shoulder. Baur, expecting the marshal would attempt to draw his gun, was taken entirely by surprise. The blow caught him squarely on the point of the chin, bending him backward and knocking loose the gun that almost miraculously had appeared in his hand. Head and shoulders struck the ground with an audible thud. An arm flopped limply in the dust and the gunman lay still.

Striding forward, Galoway stood gazing down at his opponent, his face expressionless.

"Well, for gosh sakes!" the man in the doorway behind Miller breathed in awe. "Tulsa Jack Bauer knocked colder'n a herring by Chet Galoway! Who'd 'a' thunk it!"

Miller dismounted, dropping the reins of his horse, but said nothing. Galoway ceased his scrutiny of the supine form at his feet and turned away, not noticing the flickering of the gunman's eyelids that told of returning consciousness. He had no more than taken ten steps when Baur struggled to his knees, murderous hate gleaming in his narrowed eyes. His hand crept stealthily out to the fallen gun, closed about it. With a cry of warning on his lips, Miller leaped toward him, knowing as he did that he could never reach the man in time.

Crash! Galoway stopped as if he had run into a stone wall. Swiftly he whirled about, gun drawn. His eyes glazed as he strove with visible effort to raise the weapon and pull the trigger. His tall form stiffened, slowly raised on its toes as some inward, convulsive tightening of the muscles seized him. An instant he stood thus, while Miller halted and watched in horror. Then, still stiff and unbending, he turned slightly and fell, a last spasmodic twitching of his fingers exploding the revolver in a jarring burst of sound. The bullet kicked up a puff of dust at one side; that was all.

A triumphant leer on his coarse features, Baur walked to the body, and kicked it savagely in the side. Holstering his gun, he stepped over the dead officer and without a backward glance went down the street. When he had disappeared into a saloon a number of men came furtively out of nearby buildings and clustered around the body.

"Say, what kind of a town is this!" Miller demanded hotly, gazing about at the citizens. "Have you people got a habit of letting men get shot in the back like this? Plain murder, that's what it was, and none of you make a move while the killer walks away as calm as you please!"

The fellow who had watched the tragedy from the doorway of the bank, a middle-aged, bronzed cattleman, looked pityingly at the speaker. It was evident that he did not think much of what he saw.

"It's all right for you to say that,

stranger," he answered. "There ain't no shame in a man backin' down to Tulsa Jack Baur, so we won't take offense. There ain't nobody in this country who's a match for Baur. We're scared of him, I ain't foolin', and we ain't ashamed to admit it!"

"What's that got to do with it?" queried Miller. "Do you let this two-bit gunman, this shoot-'em-in-the-back killer, strut around here and do as he pleases?"

The cattleman spat at a stone at the edge of the sidewalk and missed.

"We don't let him," he explained indulgently, as one does to a child. "Nope, we don't let him. He just goes ahead and does what he wants to do, regardless.

"There ain't a man here, stranger, who ain't counted a good man with a gun. We've all of us seen many a gunfight, and felt the bite of more'n one bullet, too. But none of us is as good as Jack Baur, and the dang coyote knows it!"

He glanced about for confirmation of his statement, and several men, experienced, capable citizens, nodded.

"Turner's right," spoke up one of them. "Baur is as good as half a dozen men when it comes to slingin' hardware. I've seen him stack up against three cowpunchers who didn't know much about him, or else put too much faith in not believin' all you hear, and them three gents are pushin' up daisies in Boot Hill now!"

"If he's as good as all that," said Miller, puzzled, "why does he shoot men in the back? Seems like he could give a fellow all kinds of an edge."

Turner, the cattleman, spat again, this time with fair accuracy.

"Yeah, he could, but that just shows the poison meanness of the critter. Still, Galoway was something of a gunman himself, and Bauer never was much of a hand to take chances. Chet was a good marshal, too. Came here from Perry, and that's about as tough a town as you'll find in all Oklahoma. Speakin' of marshals, this is the third one we've had this month, and the moon's still young, too!"

"What happened to the other two?" Miller asked curiously.

Turner grinned.

"Both of 'em died of lead poison," he replied dryly. "Just like Chet, here, and the lead came from the gun of Tulsa Jack Baur! He's rough on marshals, Baur is."

A thin, wiry old man joined the group, and Turner spoke grimly to him, addressing him as "Judge." Miller was glad of the interruption, for now that his heat and wrath at the cowardly killing had subsided somewhat, he felt once more inclined to withdraw into the background.

"Chalk up another one for Baur, Judge," the cattleman said. "Who are you goin' to get for marshal now?"

The jurist shook his head dubiously.

"I don't know, Bill. Nobody wants the job. Can't say as I blame 'em, of course. Anyhow, it's only asking a man to commit suicide to persuade him to take the job of marshal in Holdenville. I know only one man who is as good or better than Baur, and that's the famous marshal up at Abilene. Wild Bill, they call him, and they say he's next to chain lightning with a gun."

Turner nodded gravely.

"I've heard of him. Seems like he's downed eighty-five gents who got the bug in their cranium that they were faster than he was. But he's gettin' old now, ain't he?"

"Guess he is, but they say he hasn't slowed up a mite. I tried to get him to come down here last month, but he wrote back that he couldn't. So I guess we'll just have to put up with Tulsa Jack and pray he breaks his neck or a horse kicks him in the head. Some of you boys carry Galoway to my office, will you?"

Impulsively, sudden determination in his mild blue eyes, Miller pushed forward.

"Wait a minute, Judge," he said. "You say no one will take Galoway's place?"

The jurist nodded.

"You've got it right, young fellow. We brought the last three marshals in from other towns, and no one here will accept the job. Why?"

For answer Miller stooped swiftly, unpinned the star from the vest of the dead man, and pinned it on his own.

"Swear me in," he bade quietly.

For an instant there was silence. That

this womanish looking youngster should so boldly offer to take the office every veteran gunman in town had refused was a shock to everyone present. A man beside Turner laughed suddenly, gratingly, but sobered immediately when Miller's blue orbs, now strangely cold and menacing, swung to his. The judge placed his hand in fatherly fashion on Miller's shoulder.

"I can't do it, son. It would be little short of murder, and I don't want the responbility of sending you to your death on my conscience. You don't realize what it means, boy."

"Don't realize!" Miller cried passionately. "I realize this much, that this Tulsa Jack Baur is allowed to run loose like a locoed wolf, doing as he pleases and shooting better men than he is from behind! Good, upright citizens turn out of his path when they see him coming, and most likely your women folks are afraid to walk down the street in broad daylight!"

The judge sighed wearily, helplessly.

"That's about the gist of it, son. But what are we going to do about it when the best men we can find are killed off the first time they buck into Baur? Tell me that?"

Miller thought seriously.

"It's a hard problem, I admit," he said at last. "All your other marshals have failed, haven't they? Well, I'm willing to take the chance, so what more can you ask? I'm of age, my own boss, and I use my head for something besides a peg to hang my hat on. Swear me in!"

Reluctantly, sorrowfully, the jurist consented.

"All right, son, but your blood is on your own head. Come down to my office so I can get a Bible."

TWO hours later, in the tiny shack beside the general store which was the headquarters of the city marshal, the new custodian of Holdenville's law and order glanced up from a sheaf of reward notices at the sound of footsteps. Framed in the doorway was a gaunt, bearded man who shoved his sombrero on the back of his head and gestured with a grimy thumb in the direction of the street.

"Tulsa Jack wants to see you," he announced with a grandiose air. "You'll find him in the rear of the Apache Saloon."

Turning on his heel, he started out as if that settled the matter. He had conveyed Baur's message to Miller, and in his simple mind lurked not a thought that the latter would dare disobey. The marshal's cool, quiet words, therefore, surprised him.

"Just a minute. Tell Baur that if he wants to see me he can come where I am."

The messenger stared blankly, mouth wide open.

"What—what did you say?" he queried, apparently doubting his senses.

"Yeah, you heard what you thought you did," Miller told him. "If Baur thinks I come at the beck and call of every two-bit gunman, why he's got another think coming, that's all. Go tell him what I said."

The man stumbled out of the office in a daze. To him, Miller's defiance was incomprehensible.

Some five minutes later the thumping of boots on the boardwalk outside told the young marshal that trouble, with a large "T," was on its way. Unperturbed, however, he continued his study of the reward circulars, nor did he look up as Baur, his unshaven face black with rage, entered the room. So wrathful was the gunman that for a moment he was speechless.

Calmly, with studied, casual movements, Miller laid aside the circulars and leaned back in his chair. For the first time it appeared that he noticed Baur, and he looked him over as a cowman might look at a scrub yearling.

"Well!" he demanded suddenly, "what do you want? Get it over with, because my time is valuable. I've got something to do besides gossip with every Tom, Dick and Harry that comes along."

Baur's eyes bulged. It was plain that no one had ever spoken to him in just that manner before.

"What!" he shrieked. "Say, do you know who I am? I'm Tulsa Jack Baur!"

"Is that a fact?" marveled Miller. "Honest, now? You wouldn't fool me, would you?"

The cool insolence of the youngster jarred the gunman.

"Listen, you young squirt!" he roared, shaking his fist angrily, "no one can make a simp of Jack Baur and get away with it!"

Not a muscle quivered in Miller's face. His voice was unchanged.

"What are you going to do about it?" he asked.

"What am I going to—hell!"

In a paroxsym of rage Baur reached suddenly across the paper-littered desk, caught hold of the marshal's collar and jerked him savagely out of his chair. Baur's left fist, hard driven, smashed down the lighter man's feeble resistance and hammered heavily on his ribs and head. Miller made no attempt to return the blows, and Baur flung him disgustedly into a corner. There he lay cringing, one arm raised to ward off a threatened kick.

"And you call yourself a man, eh?" Baur questioned with a sneer. "Bah! I intended to kill you, but I don't shoot kids. But listen to this. I'll give you just an hour to get out of town. If I catch you here after that time, I'll beat you to a pulp! Don't forget it!"

Contemptuously he turned his back and clumped stiffly out. When he had gone, Miller got to his feet and wiped a trickle of blood from his lips. He smiled queerly as Turner stalked into his office and glared at him.

"I saw that through the window," the cattleman rasped. "So you're the gent that was goin' to fix Jack Baur. You'd better run home to your ma before he takes you over his knee and spanks you!"

Still glaring, he went out. Miller smiled queerly again, got his hat, and followed. He stopped in the street and glanced toward the Apache Saloon. Baur was walking slowly into it, but faced about as a man across the street from him called his name. The newcomer held an envelope in his hand, and he began talking excitedly the instant Baur came up to him. The gunman looked hurriedly around, said something to the man, and both went hastily into the saloon.

Scenting something, he knew not what, Miller dodged between two buildings and ran swiftly to the rear. There he darted from yard to yard until he judged he was behind the saloon. Observing an open window, he edged cautiously up to it and listened. There was no sound within. Then a door slammed and the voices of two men, one of which he recognized as Baur's, came to the listener.

"It's that mail robbery, Jack," said someone whom Miller guessed to be the fellow who had called to the gunman. "The one on the T & O last month. This letter is from a pal of mine at Oklahoma City. He says the government is on the rampage and that you are suspected of havin' somethin' to do with it. A couple of deputy United States marshals are due to arrive here this afternoon to arrest you."

"Let 'em come," snorted Baur. "Who cares? I've had marshals after me before."

"But this is different, chief. One of them is the same Bob Gilman who busted up the Doolin gang. He's hell on wheels, Gilman is."

There was silence for a moment, and peeping over the window sill Miller caught a serious look on Baur's face.

"That sure is different," the gunman admitted. "But what can I do?"

"Sears and Timmons and I want to get out of the country till the thing blows over, chief. We need money, though, to do it. You'd better go, too."

Baur shook his head decidedly.

"No. I haven't any money to give you. Went broke in a poker game last night."

"But we've got to do somethin'!" the man protested. "Gilman is bad enough without another marshal with him. Can't you get the money somewhere?"

"Um. Well-l, maybe. By George, yes! Just remembered that the bank got a shipment of gold by Wells Fargo yesterday. You go down to the creek bottom where the road crosses half a mile out of town and wait for me there. Take Sears and Timmons with you. This is a one-man job, but it will mean I'll never be able to come back to Holdenville. The men in this town are a lot of old maids, but if

they once get real stirred up they might be dangerous. We ain't never pulled nothin' like this here before. You know how it is. They'll stand for killin's, but if somebody robs them of a dollar-six-bits they'll go crazy."

"Uh-huh. But what about this new marshal? Are you figurin' on him?"

"Don't make me laugh! He's just a kid, Jake. Why, I slammed him in the mouth a while ago and he never even made a move for his gun. He won't make no trouble. I told him I'd give him an hour to get out of town, and likely he's ten miles from here already. Even if he has got nerve enough to stick around, though, I can down him easy. He's the least of my worries."

"When are you goin' to stage the hold-up?"

Baur glanced at his watch.

"In twenty minutes exactly. It's most noon now. There won't be anybody in the bank but the cashier. I'll stroll casually in, shove a gun in his face, and be off with the money before he can give the alarm. It's so easy, it's absurd!"

Miller waited to hear no more. Slipping quietly away, he returned to the street and walked rapidly in the direction Turner had taken. He found the cattleman talking to a cowboy at a hitching-rack, and drew him aside.

"Listen, Turner," he said hurriedly, ignoring the disdain in the rancher's eyes, "will you do something for me and Holdenville? Never mind what you think of me. It's important, more so than I can tell you. Will you do it?"

"What is it?" Turner's interest was stirred in spite of himself.

"Get four or five men together right away and ride out to the creek bottom where the road crosses. You'll find three men there waiting for somebody. No matter who they are, disarm them and bring them back. If it wasn't outside my jurisdiction I'd deputize you, but all I can do now is to ask you to get those men. Will you?"

"What's it all about?"

"I can't tell you that. Hurry, man, every minute counts. Yes or no?"

"All right, I'll do it," Turner acquiesced grudgingly. "But what if they show fight?"

"You know how to handle rustlers and horse thieves, don't you? There you are: treat them the same. Only, get them dead or alive!"

Turner watched the marshal curiously as his lithe form disappeared into the bank. Then he hastily gathered half a dozen men and rode out of town at their head.

Inside the bank, Miller nodded casually to the cashier, a weazened old man, and took up a station at the top of the three steps which led to the room from the street. His demeanor was indifferent, languid, and after one glance at him the cashier resumed his work. The three steps formed part of a vestibule, and Miller knew he could not be seen except from the doorway. The swinging, double doors were open to admit whatever vestige of wind happened to stray that way. With the exception of a few horses, no life was visible.

Ten minutes passed. The slow, dust-muffled sounds of a trotting horse reached the waiting marshal, sounds that ceased in front of the bank. Then the creak of saddle leather as the rider dismounted, and the thumping of boot heels. Miller straightened, moved away from the wall and loosened the gun in his holster. The footsteps approached swiftly. A shadow fell on the floor of the vestibule. Baur came in, and stopped abruptly as he saw the slender figure of the marshal. He blinked once or twice to offset the change from bright sunlight to the darker interior of the building.

"You!" he roared. "Didn't I tell you to get out of the country?"

"I do remember hearing something of the kind," Miller admitted coolly. "Only I thought you were fooling."

"Huh? Why you saphead! You certainly are the dumbest thing on two legs ever I saw. Get out of here before I take a notion to bounce a bullet off your thick skull!"

Well feigned amazement lit up Miller's features.

"Honest, now, Mr. Baur, weren't you

fooling?" His tone was ingratiating. "Why, I can't leave. I've got to hold down this job of marshal! Please let me stay!"

The amazement in Baur's eyes more than matched the marshal's. Here was an officer of the law literally begging in a scared voice to be allowed to stay in town and preserve the peace as he had sworn to do. Such a thing was entirely past the gunman's comprehension. So he put it down to sheer fright and his confidence increased by leaps and bounds. However, he had no intention of making any concession whatever.

"For the last time, get out of here!" he growled savagely.

Miller shook his head slowly, hesitantly.

"No, I can't do that, Mr. Baur. You see, I overheard you say you were going to rob the bank, and of course I couldn't let you do that. You see how it is don't you?"

This was said in such an apologetic manner that Baur almost choked. The knowledge that the marshal had deliberately eavesdropped, overcame his astonishment, however, and he trembled with rage.

"That settles your hash, kid! But I'll give you a chance. Pull your gun!"

"No, no! I'd much rather you'd draw yours first. I don't want it said that I took an unfair advantage of you. But I wish you would do it quickly, because I sent Turner to capture your three men and I want to be free to attend to them when—"

The cashier gasped. He, too, was astounded by Miller's words; so much so that despite the knowledge that Baur intended robbing the bank he utterly forgot the loaded, sawed-off shotgun at his side that was always kept ready for just such an emergency.

"You what?" Baur cried.

"I sent Turner and four or five men to capture your gang," Miller explained.

That was the last straw. The spell that all this time had held the killer motionless was abruptly broken. With a snarl of rage he drew and fired, his hand darting down and up again with the speed that had made him so famous.

Yet, swift as he was, Miller was swifter. His gun fairly leaped into his hand, and roared forth its leaden-tongued challenge in a stabbing jet of orange flame, just a split-second in advance of Baur's. A red spot magically appeared on the gunman's breast; his knees sagged, and gave way under him. An almost comical look of surprise shone on his face as he fell in an inert huddle, gun falling to the floor with a harsh clatter.

Grimacing with pain, Miller clutched his shoulder, where Baur's bullet had torn through the muscles, and stumbled weakly down the steps to the body. The gunman was dead, there could be no doubt of that. The marshal holstered his revolver and tightened his grip on his shoulder to lessen the loss of blood. From all sides of the bank men came running, demanding to know what the shooting was all about. The judge who had sworn Miller in was in the van, and the marshal stepped outside to meet him.

"What's happened, son?" the jurist cried, panting for breath. "Why, you're shot!"

Miller grinned.

"It's nothing much, Judge. Missed the bone, and I'll be fit as a fiddle again in no time at all. Had an argument with your leading citizen. He's in there."

The judge looked into the vestibule and stiffened.

"Baur!" he ejaculated. "It's Baur!"

"Right, first guess," Miller agreed. "He had it all fixed to rob the bank. Then he and his gang were going to light out because a couple of deputy United States marshals are on their trail. I sent Turner and several gents to corral the rest of the gang. Here comes Turner now."

The cattleman rode up, alone, and leaped to the ground.

"If I'd known you wanted me to get Baur's men I wouldn't have gone, Marshal," he said tersely. "They showed fight, though, so we had it out with them. One of them got away and the boys are trailin' him. The others are just so much fertilizer. What the Sam Hill's happened here, anyway?"

The judge told him briefly, patently

enjoying the cowman's great amazement.

"No, is that so? Well, I'll be— Say, Miller, how'd you do it?"

"Why, he was a little too confident of himself, that's all. I let him think that I was the scared kid he thought I was, and he was so sure he could kill me that he wasn't as fast on the draw as he ordinarily would have been."

The bank cashier pushed his way through the crowd and stopped in front of the marshal, who was modestly trying to back away.

"Wait a minute, young feller," he ordered. "Judge, don't you believe him. Maybe Baur was a mite slower, but he was mighty fast, just the same. I saw it all. I know. This kid was a streak of lightning, that's what! Son, where'd you learn to sling a gun like that?"

Miller smiled shyly.

"A man up at Abilene taught me," he answered. "He's made me practice ever since I could pull a trigger. They call him 'Wild Bill'."

"What? Wild Bill, the fellow they say is the greatest gunman the West ever saw?"

"Yes, that's him. He couldn't come, when you wrote to him, Judge, so finally I made him let me. You see, he's my dad, and he says I'm as good with a gun as he ever was, only I lack confidence."

The judge snorted derisively.

"Confidence? Good Lord, boy, with a heritage like that you don't need it!"

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

BRANDON RIDES THE BORDER

A Complete, Fast-Moving Western Novel

By GRANT TAYLOR

MacKNIGHT BARES HIS BREAST

A Story of the Far North

By DOUGLAS F. MUSSINON

OUT WHERE THE WORST BEGINS

A Baldy Sours Yarn

By CHARLES W. TYLER

BATTLING THROUGH

A Horse Racing Story

By JOHN MILLER GREGORY

FROZEN ROADS

By John Beames

Stinging his lumberjacks to epic effort 'mid bitter cold, Ray Gower wreaks his will on the Northwood's forest and laughs at this hated enemy.

"YOU'RE smart, haar." A peculiar sound between a snort and a snarl came from Mick's mouth. "Too damn smart. Think you're runnin' the whole works, haar? Well, I'm goin' to run you —I'm goin' to run you clear out the country."

Mick Nivens, walking boss for the Northern Lumber Company, glared at Ray Gower, foreman of Camp Three. His red eyelashes flickered above eyes as yellow as a cat's; his long mustache hung below his working jaws and twitched with the fury of his utterance; his heavy head was thrust forward on his huge shoulders, and he menaced the little man with a hairy and misshapen hand.

"You can't do it, you old mossback," retorted Gower in equal fury, his pale gray eyes gleaming like ice under a cloudy sky, his small figure erect and quivering and his fists clenched until the knuckles showed white.

"I can't do it, haar? Well, I can run you out of this here camp, an' out of ever getting another job with the Northern. Better get a job in a wood camp, haar?"

To suggest to a lumberjack that he should work in a wood camp is a peculiarly deadly insult.

But Gower had also an edge to his tongue. "You go back to rollin' drunks in a tough bar, you old pimp," he snapped. "Go wash yourself. I ain't goin' to talk to anybody what stinks like you do."

He swaggered out before the outraged Nivens could command his tongue. He had the better of the exchange of amenities, but it seemed that the last word would remain with Mick. The Northern would no longer employ him; other outfits had long since engaged their foremen for the winter; in effect, Mick had run him out of the country.

But it was with a high head that he cashed his pay check at the bank and walked out into the single street of the lumbering town. Brooding resentfully on his own wrongs, he did not notice big

Vern Duffield lumbering down the street towards him. Vern was clothed in a long coat of mangy dogskin, with a defunct cat on his head, and his pop-eyes stared short-sightedly at the world over a huge frost-bitten nose, in shape and color like a frankfurter.

He caught sight of Gower and began to bray, "Why, hello, hello, old hoss, how you keepin'?"

Gower knew the man only as a sub-contractor with a dozen teams for hire, who displayed considerable cunning in securing light work for his horses and good pay for himself. So his answer to the greeting was not very cordial.

"Hello yourself. Who're you gyppin' now?"

"Ha-ha. Gyppin', eh? I'm workin' for myself now. Yes, sir, I'm my own boss. Got my own camp an' a nice stand of timber, fine timber. Got a big contrac' from the Northern. Goin' to clean up a pile this winter. But say, ain't you workin'?"

"Do I look like it?"

"No, well say now, say, want a job? Hundred a month, eh? Runnin' camp for me? I want a push—can't handle the whole works myself. Had Cly Hobbs, but he goes on the bat, gets the snakes, yeller spiders in his hair, up in hospital right now. Just say the word an' the job's yours."

Gower heartily despised Duffield and knew him to be stingy and dishonest, but the opportunity of showing Mick Nivens that he could find work was too good to be missed.

"I'm on," he said, after a moment's reflection, "When do you pull out?"

"Right away. Just waitin' around until I could pick up a good man. Go get your bag while I get hooked up."

On the road Duffield talked loudly and boastfully, but with suspicious reticences. Gower's questions mostly went unanswered. He admitted when cornered, though, that the gang had proved somewhat hard to handle and that things might be better. But he was careful to lay the blame entirely on the shoulders of Cly Hobbs, now in the hospital with "snakes" and predicted flatteringly that Gower would immediately put things to rights.

Gower, looking at him shrewdly out of his pale eyes, felt more suspicious than ever. He knew Vern was not the man to handle a gang of bushwhackers, tough as mulehide and proud of it: on the other hand, he was not the man to admit it unless he was in a very tight corner indeed. Hobbs had never been foreman in a first-class camp, and had been notorious as "strawpush," on various outfits, for driving his men and toadying to his superiors.

They arrived at Duffield's camp after dark. It consisted of two bunkhouses, stables, cook shack, and at a little distance a combined office and store, with living quarters at the rear for Duffield and his foreman. The buildings were of the usual type, long and low, ill-lit and worse ventilated, built of unbarked logs and roofed with tar paper. Even in the starlight they appeared to Gower's keen and observant eye badly built and badly laid out.

The barn boss took the team, and the two men walked over to the cook shack. The cook got up from a chair beside the big range and recognized Gower.

"Ho dere, Ray Goware, comme ca va? You are new poosh dis domp, hein?"

"Va bien, Lou. Yes, I'm the big noise."

"You need be. Dis is one damn hell camp I ever see. But now you eat. You fin' out soon plenty enoff."

Gower and Duffield ate, while Monsieur Lucien Berard, rather pointedly ignoring the latter, inquired news of town and mutual friends. After the meal Gower pulled out his watch and turned a cold and disapproving eye on Duffield.

"It's ten-twenty right now an' there's more noise comin' out of that bunkhouse of yours than a barroom riot. Don't them birds never go to roost, Vern?"

Duffield clawed nervously at his cheek with dirty fingernails. "I guess they kinder got out of hand, Ray, me an' Cly bein' away an' all. I seem to got some tough nuts picked up amongst 'em."

Berard was heard to mutter, "Enfants chiennes."

"Well, the time to straighten 'em out is now," said Gower firmly. "Come an' tell 'em they got to roll over when I holler."

He flung open the bunkhouse door on a scene of mild riot. Fortunately there was no whiskey in camp. The present amusement was noisy but innocent enough. Bearded ladies, a handkerchief on the left arm indicating their sex, swung in a spirited quadrille with equally whiskered partners, the music being supplied by two mouth organs and a shrieking fiddle, while a bull-voiced man in a corner called off.

The music stopped and the dancers halted reluctantly. Duffield, pale and evidently quaking inwardly, lifted a weak and quavering voice, "Boys, this here's Ray Gower. He'll be runnin' this camp from now on."

He slipped behind his diminutive foreman, breathing hard. Gower walked into the middle of the floor, watch in hand. In a voice that carried to the end of the long bunkhouse without being a shout, and in a tone that was firm without being bullying, he said, "Well, lads, it's ten-thirty now. Time to roll in. Fellers can't work if they don't sleep."

There were a few rebellious growls, but most of those present knew the little man by reputation, and many by experience, as one not to be trifled with. They dispersed gradually to their bunks, the teamsters filing back to their own bunkhouse in orderly fashion. In twenty minutes both bunkhouses were plunged in silence and darkness.

As they walked to the office, Duffield looked down upon his small foreman with admiration. "You sure do know how to handle 'em, Ray."

"Huh, the handlin's just begun. There's goin' to be a big clean-up here right away.

The clangor of the cook's triangle woke Gower in the icy darkness before dawn, and he hopped out of his bunk, dressed promptly and went to the door. Duffield was still snoring.

The bunkhouse door opened and men began to drift in a leisurely fashion towards the cook shack, where the cookee was performing a second fantasia on the triangle.

Gower snorted. "Some outfit: takes two calls for breakfast, eh? By the devil's whiskers, I'll have to tie a can to a few tails around here."

The breakfast was a poor affair: sticky mush, rusty salt pork, soggy potatoes that had evidently been frosted, stewed black tea and bread.

"Hog-swill," commented Gower acidly to himself, "Vern's a cheap skate all right. Can't keep good men on this chuck."

Half an hour later, though it was still pitch-dark, he flung open the bunkhouse door with the time-honored call, "Hurrah, boys!"

More than half the crew were not yet dressed for the bush, and were languidly putting on their footwear. They gazed at him with insolent eyes.

The first real test of his authority had come. "Come on, roll your tails there. Daylight in the swamp," he cried commandingly.

"What's your hurry?" growled a cross-eyed man with a scrubby yellow beard?"

"No hurry for you," snapped Gower, turning on him like a terrier, "you're hittin' the trail for town. Anybody wants to go with you can pack their turkeys. The rest of you roll out quick."

Two-thirds of the crew duly rolled out and trailed away into the darkness under the standing timber.

"Come on to the office an' get your time," Gower commanded the sullen remainder.

A number of them followed him to the office, where Duffield, in his underwear and socks, had just crawled out of his bunk and stood rubbing his eyes and yawning.

"Bunch goin' to town," said Gower shortly. "Where's the time book?"

"Hell, Ray, are you bouncin' the whole crew? Why, man, how'm I goin' to carry on?"

"You'll carry on a lot better without this crowd; ain't one of 'em worth the powder to blow him to blazes. When I get this camp straightened out, there'll be lots of men, good men, glad of a job here."

When the last of the disaffected had shuffled off with his time check, Gower went back to the bunkhouse. A dozen or

so men were still lying in their bunks.

"Sick, eh?" he said to the first with chilly irony. "Too bad. Camp ain't no place for a poor sick lad. Much better in town. If you're feelin' no better in the mornin' you can go down with the tote team. All the other sick men too."

He drew the bull-cook, an elderly and very dirty Swede into a corner.

"See here, Ole, the lights goes out at half after nine. Let 'em holler. An' have the men that ain't dead or dyin' out of their bunks by six every morning. See?"

"Dot's goot, boss," said the Swede grinning, and displaying a set of broken teeth stained with snuff. "My name ban Yonas Christenson, boss. I do yost vat you say, yost vat you say, ya."

"That's the lad, Yonas. We'll make a camp of this dump yet."

It was now daylight, and the tireless little man set off on a tour of inspection. He passed through the gang, which were going about their work in a dilatory and unenthusiastic fashion, and there was a noticeable quickening of their activities in his turbulent wake. Four men who showed a disposition to be recalcitrant he promptly sent back for their time, and assured that the impulse he had given would keep the remainder working for the rest of the day, he extended his field of exploration.

All that day he tramped, sometimes on roads and sometimes through knee-deep snow. He forgot all about dinner in his absorption in his task, and it was not until darkness made it impossible to see more that he turned homeward.

He was depressed and thoughtful and full of resentment against Duffield. The accumulation of problems presented to him for solution seemed overwhelming, a mutinous and disorganized crew being amongst the least troublesome.

Supper was over and Duffield in the office. Gower went into the cook shack for something to eat and a consultation with Berard. The sturdy French-Canadian was full of indignation and grievances. He ran his fingers through his spiky black hair until it stood straight on end all over his head. His large dark eyes flashed tragically, he gesticulated wildly, and his deep bellowing voice shook the building.

"Sacre mojee, Ray, dis is wan hell of a joint. How am I feed a crew dis pig-feed, hein? I am shame. Look." He held up a huge chunk of frozen meat. "Beef, eh? Ox, ox what is pool de plough forty-nine year. You eat heem, he is brreak your teet'. You heet heem wit' ax, de ax is bounce. Toff! Dieu mon Dieu, he is toffer dan robber shoe. An potat', froze, froze an' scab. All coleur, peenk an' blue an' raid. An' steenk, rrotten 'ow he steenk."

He flung both hands wide with all fingers extended. "What I gee de boys for eat, eh? No cake, no pie, only prrune. Ah, de damn prrune, I am shame I look de prrune on de eye no more. A man say, 'What is dis I eat?' an' de odder lad say, 'Dat it prrune some more,' an' de firs' man is put hees haid on tabl' an grroan an' grroan. Mon Dieu, I am want keel heem, but how can? I am shame. Ray, I queet dis job. I am bonch her."

Gower nodded his head somberly. He was very close to bunching the job himself, but he would not give in without some attempt at mending matters. Meanwhile he must pacify Berard, who was a good cook, and a good cook means more to the comfort and happiness of a logging crew than anything else.

"You're right, Lou," he said sympathetically, "But just as a favor to me, don't quit until I get a chance to see what I can do. I'm goin' to talk turkey to Vern, an' if he don't come across, well, we can hit the trail together. How's that?"

"Ray, I take your word for dat. You get me grob an' I stay till de las' dog is 'ong. Odderwise I go on de town an' get drunk, hein?"

Gower interviewed Duffield. "Well, Vern, I been lookin' her over. Say, you got yourself in some jam, didn't you? Hell man, don't you know every road you got runs uphill?"

"Well, it's got to," protested Duffield with an injured air. "How can I help it? That's the way the land lays. I got to get the stuff over the ridge to the landin' at the lake, an' the blame ground all slopes the wrong way."

"You bought a blind horse all right this trip. Now I know why the company let you pick up this limit so cheap," observed Gower.

"But ain't it a dandy stand of timber?" put in Duffield, anxious to get away from an unpleasant subject.

"It is, I guess it's the cleanest stand of big stuff I ever seen in my life. But that's only the half of it. You'll make big money on the cuttin' all right, but you'll lose it all, an' more, too, gettin' it to the lake on that road of yours."

"Why? All the grades is easy," objected Duffield.

"The grades is easy, but they're all uphill grades, all but the last mile or two. I see you're only haulin' half loads right now, an' four an' six horses to the load. Where d'you figure you're comin' out on that?"

"I don't know," he answered, sulkily. "Guess I'll make out."

"You won't. An' more'n that, Vern, every day you put them skinny little runts of horses on the log road you're losin' more money. Why don't you put your big teams in? Same old story, I bet, tryin' to save your own horses for the light jobs, eh?"

"Well, they're all I got," came the reply. more sulkily still.

"You won't have them neither very long. You're throwin' away dollars to save pennies. It's all right to save your own horses an' gyp the other guy, but every day you save your horses now you're gyppin' yourself."

Duffield was reduced to an unintelligible grunt.

"An' another thing," went on the little man inexorably, "I looked in the barn. The barn boss tells me the hay's all mouldy —you got it cheap I guess—an' he says the horses just gets a gallon and a half of oats a day. You know damn well you can't work a heavy horse on mouldy hay and a gallon and half oats a day an' get any work out of 'em. You don't do it with your own horses. You can figure that every hungry horse you have in your outfit is losin' you money every day. If I'm goin' to be boss here I ain't goin' to have my horses all poor an' ga'nted up. I told the barn boss to go ahead an' feed them horses what they ought to have."

"You ain't missed much," commented Duffield bitterly.

"I don't aim to miss much. It's my business to know what every man an' horse under me is doin' an' how he's bein' fed. An' that's the last thing I want to talk to you about—I might as well put the whole works up to you straight an' then you can say what you're goin' to do about it. There's got to be better grub shot around here. Lou Berard's up on his ear—says he gets better chuck or pulls his freight. An' I don't blame him. You know yourself the kind of slop the crew's gettin'. No good man'll stay in camp an' eat hog-swill, an' I don't aim to have any but good men under me. The bunch of short-tailed woodchucks you got here ain't worth two-bits a bushel — they're losin' you money—but if I can promise 'em the chuck, I'll have a real gang of work fiends here inside a month."

Duffield flung up his hands. "What do you think I am, John D. Rockerfeller?" he bawled despairingly. "Where'd I get the money? The way things is I won't break even, an' if I got to feedin' up the horses an' givin' the crew roast turkey an' pun'kin pie every day, I'll be slidin' out the small end the horn in jig-time."

"Well, I told you what's wanted. You hired me for foreman an' I'm prepared to run this camp the way it ought to be run, an' make money for you too. But you got to feed 'em, men an' horses. I tell you plump an' plain, you either got to get this outfit straightened around quick or you'll hit the toboggan. If you don't like what I'm tellin' you, I'll pull my own freight in the mornin'. It's strictly up to you."

There were tears in Duffield's pop-eyes. He groaned and shivered. "Now don't throw me down, Ray," he whimpered, "I'm right up against it. I wisht I'd never went into the damn business a-tall. If this don't come off I'm goin' to be busted flat. I know you can pull me out—I put the whole thing in your hands—go ahead an' say what you want. You're push an' what

you say goes. I can't say fairer, can I? You won't throw me down, Ray, will you?"

Though he despised Duffield from the bottom of his heart as a greedy, stingy liar and coward, this was a piece of subtle flattery Gower could not resist. Given carte blanche, he would have made a praiseworthy effort to abolish Gehenna, regardless of the risks involved.

But he was not prepared to trust Duffield, and it was not until the latter had agreed to surrender into the hands of his masterful foreman every vestige of real power and to retain for himself only the offices of clerk and timekeeper, that he consented to be appeased. Well satisfied on the whole, but with the problem of the long uphill haul still heavy on his mind, he rolled into his bunk.

By morning all but one of the sick men had miraculously recovered, and him Gower sent to town with the tote team. With the tote teamster also went Berard's order for fresh meat of better quality and for evaporated apples, dried peaches and raisins for the making of pies and cakes. Gower told the teamster, too, to pick up any good man he found looking for work.

In a few days the whole spirit of the camp had subtly changed. The malcontents, loafers and incompetents had been ruthlessly weeded out; the bull-cook, backed by Gower's authority, became a bunkhouse martinet, and his men were in bed and out of it prompt to the minute; the barn boss and the teamsters, no longer condemned to tend and drive starved horses, took a brighter view of life; Lucien Berard, with good food to cook, smiled all over his broad face, and the crew, with well-filled stomachs, smiled back.

The work began to go with a swing, and new men of strength and skill gradually filled the places of the dismissed. But the uphill haul remained an open wound, draining out the lifeblood of the whole enterprise. Even with Duffield's powerful and well-fed teams, it still took six horses to haul a full load up the heartbreaking four miles to the crest of the ridge.

Gower was too busy with reorganization details for a time to be able to give his whole attention to the matter, and even when he had re-inspected the whole road he could find no easier grade than the one taken. He went further afield in search of an easier route, and returned to camp late one evening in a frame of mind equally compounded of resentment and jubilation.

"D'you know there's a ravine runnin' right down to the lake about a mile and a half north of the last branch?" he asked Duffield.

"Why, sure."

"Well, why in thunder didn't you run your road down that?"

"Why, Ray, it'd cost a couple thousand dollars to make a road there, it's too narrer an' it's crookeder'n a dog's hind leg."

"It's goin' to cost you a heap more than two thousand dollars to haul the road you're on now. I'm goin' to put a road in that ravine."

"Ray, you're crazy. That ravine ain't wider 'n half a minute lots of places, an' you can't make a fill with the ground froze solid the way it is. It'd take a hundred men the rest of the winter to make a road there."

"Well, the road's got to be made some way. You're goin' belly up on the other haul. I'm goin' to dope out a scheme."

He took the problem to bed with him and wrestled with it most of the night, but morning found him as far from a solution as ever. Next day he returned to the ravine in no very hopeful frame of mind, but doggedly determined not to give in.

The place was a mere gash in the ground, the bottom for the greater part of its length only a few feet wide. It was also very tortuous and choked with deadfalls. The banks were steep, and as Duffield had said, frozen as hard as rock. It was quite dry, merely draining the surrounding hills in the spring thaw.

Gower had reluctantly to admit that the difficulties in the way of making a passable road there seemed insurmountable. It would necessitate fills many feet in depth for long stretches, and require uncounted

tons of earth. After long thought, he gave up also the idea of erecting trestle work as too expensive.

It was not until he had returned disconsolately to where the ravine opened out and disappeared on the hither side of the ridge that the first gleam of light came to him. The ground was open and flat here, and at a little distance he could see a clump of alders, sure proof of water being near at hand. Penetrating the thicket he came upon a tiny stream, and tracing its upward course, he came to where a strong spring bubbled up among some trees.

He spent a busy half hour pacing distances and estimating levels by means of little sticks stuck in the snow. Then he turned and headed for camp like the wind. It was almost noon and the crew were returning to camp for dinner.

When the time came for them to return to work he halted them. "All hands to make roads," he shouted. "Rustle picks and shovels."

Greatly wondering and none too well pleased, for lumberjacks loathe and despise shovel work, the men got out the road-making implements.

Duffield, almost weeping, drew Gower aside. "Ray, have you gone crazy? You can't do it, you never can do it. I lost enough money as it is."

There was more than a shadow of doubt in the little man's mind whether he could do it, but he assumed a serene confidence. "Sure I can do it. It'll be easy as rollin' off a log. You see."

It was soon apparent, though, that it would not be as easy as rollin' off a log, stupendous as the idea behind the attempt was. Since earth fills in the ravine bed would cost too much in money and time, the sight of the spring had put it into Gower's quick mind to make the fills of living ice, the stream doing the work and providing the material. Since the spring was almost on a level with the head of the ravine it would require only a shallow ditch less than half a mile long.

But the soil was of stiff clay, frozen and mixed with granite boulders of all sizes, a glacial till that yielded hardly at all to the picks swung by the unwilling lumberjacks.

Duffield came and surveyed the work with gloomy eyes and turned away with a gesture of despair. The gang at large felt their own doubts of the success of the undertaking confirmed, and there were low mutinous growls as the hateful picks merely chipped the flinty surface and jarred them to the heels at every stroke.

At the end of two hours the entire crew had done no more than mark out the course of the ditch. Gower told off a gang to cut and pile dry wood along its course, and lit a row of fires. By dark the fires had only thawed the ground an inch or so.

Somebody would be needed to keep the fires going all night. Gower sought Jerryup. Jerryup was over six feet in height but bent almost double. A long beard streaked irregularly with red, black and silver depended from his chin and wagged perpetually as his jaws worked on a chew of tobacco.

"Well, Jerryup, think you can stay up to-night an' keep the fires goin'?"

"Why, sure, Ray," assented the old man in a snuffly drawl, "I don't hardly never sleep nohow. Don't know anybody can do with less sleep'n I can. Just so long's I can keep warm I'll be fine. But say, you won't forget to mark it in my time?"

"You stay with the job, old lad, and it's double time for you. How's that?"

"He-he, I don't hardly never sleep nohow, an' if I get double time I don't never need to go to bed a-tall. Sure I'll keep them fires burnin'."

Gower returned to camp at noon on the following day in profound despondence. The fires had proved a failure. It would take them weeks to do their work and it was already mid-winter. Hauling would have to begin at once if the cut was to be all got out before the break-up. He knew that his prestige, yesterday so high, had fallen very low among the disgusted crew trailing behind and exchanging covert jeers.

Worse was to come. He found in the yard a cutter, and alighting from it a man with great bowed shoulders, a long ragged

mustache and beetling brows above yellow eyes. Gower recognized his pet personal enemy, Mick Nivens.

"Where's Vern Duffield, haar?" demanded Mick with no sign of recognition.

"In the office, I guess," replied Gower with a stony stare, turning on his heel.

Nivens shambled over to the office, looking in his fur coat very much like an old and dissolute black bear.

A moment later Duffield came running to the door, yelling appealingly for Gower. The little man made his appearance from the cook shack, picking his teeth casually, but with a warlike gleam in his pale eyes.

"Haar," ejaculated Nivens, "who are you, haar?"

"You know damn well. I'm push of this here joint. What you got to say about it?"

"Push, haar, push. Puttin' this here outfit on the bum too, eh? I fired you, haar, an' you horn in here."

Gower quivered with fury. He had determined not to lose his temper, but there was a fundamental clash between the natures of the pair that made it impossible for either to be civil to the other.

"You're a lousy old liar," he snarled.

"Hey, fellers, gentlemen, fellers," pleaded Duffield, distressfully shifting from one foot to the other.

Nivens swung his bearlike head at him. "What'd you hire this man for, haar? He'd put any camp on the blink." He pointed a bony finger at the shrinking Duffield. "Your contrac' calls for three million foot delivered on the landin' by break-up. You ain't haulin' ten thousand feet a day. I come up to see about it. you are. Hirin' a man like that, haar." You know what a forfeit is, haar? This is goin' to bust you, bust you flat. You're goin' out of here in yur shirt. Damn right you are. Hirin' a man like that, haar."

Gower had got a grip on his temper. "Don't let this old windjammer bluff you, Vern," he said calmly. "He's just a little funny in the head from old age and bad whiskey. Nobody pays no attention to him no more."

Nivens turned on the little man, speechless with fury, champing his jaws so that foam appeared at the corners of his mouth, and blinking his eyes so fast that they were lost in a mist of crimson lashes. "Haar—haar. God, I'll show you. Lemme out. I'll fix you," he gasped.

He fairly ran out to the cutter and flung himself on board. He shook his fist in a comprehensive gesture that included the whole camp as he drove off.

Duffield was livid with terror. "Oh, my gosh, Ray," he chattered. "What'll he do now? We're done. Oh, Moses, Jupiter, holy cats."

"I'm goin' back to finish my dinner," said Gower. "You keep your harness on an' we'll get this straight yet."

Gower sent the men back to the bush after dinner, leaving a small gang to maintain fires at the ditch, and went for a long walk to clear his mind.

He returned to find Duffield a mere lump of misery and despair.

"I got the answer," he announced jubilanty. "Dynamite."

Duffield glared at him. "Dinnamite. What in hell do you want of dinnamite?"

"Get me the dynamite an' I'll show you."

They wrangled bitterly for two hours, almost coming to blows, but Gower had his way in the end, and before Duffield had time to change his mind a man was despatched with a team of fast horses to town for the explosive.

The dynamite arrived on the following evening, and in the morning it was once more all hands to make roads. Part of the crew were told off to clear the ravine of deadfalls and to fill its bed with all the logs and brushwood procurable. The rest drilled holes along the line of the ditch or thawed dynamite in pails of water over little fires.

All day long the air was filled with sharp and rending explosions and nauseous fumes. The proposed ditch became a series of shallow craters which the crew connected up with pick and shovel. As it became apparent that real progress was being made, the spirits of the men rose and they worked with a will. Gower's prestige was once more restored, and even strengthened, and Duffield cheered up perceptibly.

A small band of good men who had worked for Gower, having heard that he was upsetting precedent again, came to the camp to see what he was up to now. Lumberjacks love a man: they would sooner work themselves to the bone for a boss they can respect than loaf for one they despise. He welcomed them and set them promptly to work.

A few of the weaker men dropped out at dark and went back to camp, but all night long the remainder toiled heroically with fire and dynamite and pick and ax and spade. Lucien Berard, filled with fiery Gallic energy, sent out copious supplies of hot food and boiling coffee at short intervals by team. Gower moved up and down without ceasing, directing, encouraging, damning.

Morning found the work well on the way to completion, all hands weary and heavy-eyed, but full of pride in their achievements. Still they worked on. They were down through the frost, but the clay was almost as hard as rock and the boulders were bigger and more frequent the further down they went. Dynamite shattered them, and one man was hit on the head by a flying fragment and laid out. His head being bound up, he came to and could not be restrained from going to work again. They all realized that they were engaged in an exploit that would become one of the heroic legends of the woods, and they were filled with the spirit of the sagas.

By noon all was ready but for the actual turning of the spring into the ditch. A heavy charge of dynamite accomplished this amid the jubilant whoops of the crew. The spring was now cribbed tightly and capped, and the ditch covered with logs and brushwood topped with earth to keep the water from freezing. The weather was cold, the temperature standing at thirty below zero, and as the stream flowed out of the ditch into the ravine it spread and froze.

Another difficulty arose: the water, after running at random for a little while began to tunnel down through the ice already formed. This would likely have resulted shortly in the stream running to waste under a shell of ice too thin to carry the huge log sleighs. It was necessary to put down little dams in the path of the water, which then collected in pools and froze solid until it overflowed the impediment.

But by now everyone was worn out with toil and lack of sleep; they were suffering from frost-bitten ears, noses, toes and fingers; they were coated with ice from head to foot; their enthusiasm had evaporated and they were sullen and mutinous. Nobody wanted to watch and tend the flow of water through the night. Nobody, that is, but Jerryup.

Gower, stumbling with weariness, found the old man at his elbow and heard his hoarse drawl. "Leave 'er to me, Ray, I don't hardly never sleep nohow. Gimme a lantern, that's all, an' some grub. I'll be all right, long as I can keep warm."

"Go to her, old scout," said Gower, warmly grateful.

"An' you won't forget the double time?"

"Double time she is, Jerryup."

Jerryup chuckled hoarsely. "Don't hardly never sleep nohow, Ray."

There was no need for the bull-cook to yell, "Roll in," that night. The men sloughed their ice-encrusted clothing and dropped limply on their bunks, many too tired even to eat before they slept.

Gower went to bed himself after a light supper, and slept, but woke with a guilty conscience at four in the morning. He thought of the aged Jerryup all by himself out in the darkness and the bitter cold. He could be as ruthless as any conquering general when need arose, but the comfort and happiness of his crew was at all other times a leading consideration with him.

He felt responsibility towards Jerryup, and rose quickly, dressed and slipped quietly out. The pale sky of the midwinter night was thick with powdery stars, the air still and bitingly cold, and the snow creaked dryly underfoot. As he neared the ditch there came to him faintly a thin and unearthly howling. He quickened his pace and the howls increased in volume the closer he came to the ravine.

Slipping and sliding in the darkness be-

tween the high steep walls, with the freezing water underfoot forming a sticky, slippery jelly upon the ice, he stumbled along until he turned a corner and saw a lantern hanging on a bush. Beneath it was a squatting figure that writhed and gave vent to wheezy and despairing cries.

"Why, hello, hello, Jerryup, what's the matter?"

"O my God, Ray, I'm glad you come. I'm froze in—can't move—cut me loose. My God, I'm near dead of cold—cut me loose."

"Lucky I did come along: we'd 've found you froze in up to the neck by mornin'," said Gower, chopping vigorously. "How'd it happen, anyway?"

Gower could hardly suppress a chuckle as he reached for the ax sticking tantalizingly in a stump just out of reach of Jerryup's hand. The old man's feet were firmly frozen in up to the ankles and the broad tail of his red and black checked mackinaw shirt, worn in lumberjack fashion outside, was also fast in the ice. With every passing minute the water trickling down from above was getting a more inexorable grip upon him.

"Don't know how it come to happen, Ray," mumbled Jerryup with chattering teeth. "I warn't asleep—don't hardly never sleep nohow. But I was kinder tired, you know, an' I set down on a log for a little rest, an' the next thing I knowed I'd took root."

"Well, come along back to camp with me now," said Gower, assisting him to rise, which he was too stiff to do unaided. "We'll let her ride till mornin'."

"But will I get the full day for it, Ray? Double time, eh?"

"Yes, yes, come along."

Shivering, stumbling, muttering, with Gower bracing his feet and pushing behind, Jerryup crept out of the ravine and back to camp, where willing hands stripped him and put him to bed. Amazingly, he was none the worse for his experience.

There were still many difficulties to surmount; every day brought fresh problems; but Gower attacked them with furious energy and his crew was with him.

Then Mick Nivens reappeared in camp. Duffield saw him coming and fled into the bush to warn Gower. "O my gosh, Ray, he's here, an' he's got old Fin Lamphrey with him. Anyway I think it's him. Now we'll catch the devil."

"Quit shiverin', it ain't cold," replied Gower with a grin and a light in his eye. "Come on back an' we'll have some fun with 'em."

"I don't believe you're scared of a damn thing on earth," said Duffield with resentment. "But you got damn funny notions of fun."

They found Mick in his red cutter in the yard, wearing an expression of triumphant malignance, and with him no less a person than Phineas Lamphrey, the redoubtable president of the Northern Lumber Company. Lamphrey was a leathery old man with an uncompromising upper lip and a moist and hungry eye.

Nivens fired the first shot. He ignored Gower and thrust out his bearlike face at Duffield. "You ain't hauled a load for ten days, haar. Your contrac' calls for three million foot on the landin' by breakup, an' you ain't haulin'. What you got to say about it, haar?"

Duffield was livid. He began to stammer, "We are—we're goin'—we're commencin' right away."

Lamphrey cut in, in a creaky voice, "You're gettin' yourself in wrong, Mr. Duffield. This outfit ain't bein' run right. Mr. Nivens tells me you've hired a man we had to fire for incompetence." He too ignored Gower, behind whom Duffield was trying to creep. "I'm afraid we'll have to cancel your contract and take the outfit over ourselves. We can't have the timber layin' in the bush all summer."

The craven Duffield licked his dry lips, made an inarticulate bleating noise, and gave Gower an imploring look.

"You can't cancel that contract, Mr. Lamphrey," said Gower calmly.

"Who's talkin' to you, haar?" snarled Nivens.

"Shut up, you old fool," retorted Gower with cool contempt. "What do you know about anything? Mr. Lamphrey, when you get done listenin' to this old has-been's

yawp, you'd better come along an' see what's bein' done."

Nivens' jaws were champing furiously again. His mustache flickered in the wind of his outraged snorts. Lamphrey gave him a keen glance and fixed his greedy eyes on Gower. "I'm willin' to be shown," he said. "But you got to show me."

"Come on then." Gower led the way with Duffield, the cutter following behind. Nivens was talking in a low angry growl to his employer, but Gower did not deign to turn his head. Duffield lumbered along beside him, quivering with apprehension.

They came to the new, iced, logging-road that Gower had laid down on level ground through the heart of the timber belt. On either side new rollways had been constructed, and the work of piling them high with logs was going on rapidly.

Before the last of them a great log sleigh, eight feet between the massive runners, bunks fourteen feet wide, held a towering load of logs twelve feet high. The horses were put to, the runners scientifically racked loose from the ice to which their weight had frozen them, the snatch team was hooked on, and with a yell and a scrambling of steel-shod hoofs, the huge mass started on its way.

Gower dropped back to Lamphrey's side, ignoring Nivens. "We had to get a new road," he explained. "The old haul was all uphill. We found a ravine, cut a ditch from a little creek and filled her up with ice. Made a good road, down-grade every inch. Two horses can haul the biggest load you can put on. We're goin' to run day and night shifts from now till spring—figure to take down sixteen loads every twenty-four hours. Three million feet'll be easy—if you want four million we can give it to you."

Lamphrey listened with attention. His wealth was founded largely on his knowledge of men, and though he had never met Gower before, he recognized the little man as a power.

"We'll take four million if you got it," he replied. "If you got it, we'll take five." His tone implied skepticism but a willingness to be shown.

The big load had arrived at the head of the ravine. Groaning a little, but moving as softly as a cat treads, it slid away on the long easy gradient to the lake.

"You can follow her down if you like," said Gower casually. "I got to figure on getting that five million feet for you."

Lamphrey turned a cold and fishy eye upon the abashed Nivens.

"Next time you got a private scrap on your hands, Mr. Nivens, don't drag me into it," he said acidly, "I got an objection to bein' made a fool of."

NEW PHOTO DEVICE FOR ALL RADIO SETS

A NEW photo-radio receiving device, which can be attached to any radio receiver in place of the loud speaker, was demonstrated for the first time at the Radio World's Fair at Madsion Square Garden. The invention, which, it is said, can be duplicated by radio experimenters for about $100, is that of A. D. Cooley, who has been experimenting with photo-radio since 1923.

The Cooley picture receiving method is designed to be applicable to any broadcast receiver. The picture unit plugs into the set instead of the loud speaker, but an additional stage of audio amplification is used. The picture producer is inexpensive. It can be built by radio experiments for approximately $100. A feature is that it can pick up pictures on the wave lengths used for broadcasting—that is, from 200 to 550 meters. An illustration measuring four inches by five inches can be clearly and readily received in three minutes' length of time.

The instrument is simple to operate, but the quality is not perfect. It does not compare with the quality of the pictures sent and received by the American Telephone and Telegraph Company's wire method. Its quality is comparable to that of music broadcast in 1923.

The printing system is based upon a corona discharge which affects sensitized paper. That affords speed. The circuit itself is very simple and the novelty is found in the refinement of the instrument. The picture is recorded on a revolving cylinder, which is synchronized with a transmitting cylinder containing the original picture.

Several manufacturers have received the specifications, and photo-radio receiving units will soon be available for experimenters, among whom the new device is expected to stir up considerable interest.

GUN COUNTRY

A SIX-PART WESTERN NOVEL

By William Colt MacDonald

PART TWO

Read in the opening paragraphs the complete details of what has happened, and go on with the story.

BLAZE ROUTLEDGE, on his way to his home range after an absence of three years, is ambushed in Skeleton Pass by two men, and narrowly escapes. He shoots one, and the other is killed by the bite of a rattler.

The next morning Blaze rides into the town of Cougar, which has for some time been terrorized by the mysterious Black Riders. Many of the honest townspeople welcome Blaze's return, hoping he will clean out this nest of badmen as he did a similar bunch once before, when he was sheriff.

Blaze meets, on the street, three badmen who were involved in the plot to ambush him: Idaho Lannon, Squint Gilmore and Miguel Bistula. Bistula is a Mexican, a professional gunman. He picks a fight with Blaze. Without resorting to his gun, Blaze makes a fool out of him.

Routledge is welcomed all along the main street by his old friends, but they are afraid to tell him what they know of the recent lawlessness in the town for fear of being killed. They leave, one by one, when he tries to convince them to tell him what they know. They are afraid even to be seen with him. Only Greg Seward remains, and as he is giving information he suddenly slumps to the ground, dead, victim of a bullet from a silencer-equipped rifle.

With two cowboy friends, Cotton

George Bale and Turk Ziegler, Blaze goes to the Chuckaluck Palace in search of Limpy Joe Simkins, who, they have found evidence to show, was the killer. The Chuckaluck is owned by Cameo Jacklin, who some think is the head of the Black Riders.

Blaze confronts Limpy Joe, who goes for his gun; but before Blaze can draw, Limpy sinks to the floor, shot, and Cotton is covering Limpy's friends. Smoke is curling from the muzzle of Jacklin's gun!

CHAPTER VII

Blaze Refuses a Job

EVEN as Blaze Routledge's hand darted out to prevent Limpy Joe from drawing, Cameo Jacklin pulled his six-shooter and sent a lead slug winging through the heart of the man who had murdered Greg Seward. For a second Blaze thought that Jacklin's bullet had been intended for himself; then he knew differently. Any man that could get his gun into commission so quickly, wouldn't miss at such short range.

"Keep 'em high!" came Turk's voice, backing up his pardner's words. "We'll be borin' yuh at th' first move!"

Gradually the heads of the other patrons of the Chuckaluck commenced to appear from behind tables, chairs and beer cases, where they had ducked at the first sound of trouble. Only one shot had been fired, but they weren't taking any chances. One could never tell when a single shot might bring on a free-for-all.

Jacklin now trained his own gun on Lannon, Gilmore and four other men who had been with Simkins. "Keep your hands away from your guns and get out of here," he ordered sternly. "I ain't sayin' that yuh knew Limpy Joe killed Seward, but until this thing has blowed over, I'm askin' yuh not to come into th' Chuckaluck."

Blaze had pulled his own guns the instant Jacklin fired, but now, as Lannon and his men departed from the saloon without a murmur of dissent, he replaced them in holsters. Jacklin crossed the floor and stood looking down at Limpy Joe a moment. Then extending one booted foot he turned the body over on its back. "Deader'n last year's beef," he commented shortly, holstering his gun.

At that moment Sheriff Windy Landers came puffing into the saloon. He stopped short as his eyes fell on the body. "It's true, then," he wheezed. "I met Idaho Lannon outside, an' he told me they was trouble here—"

"Just like a cow's tail, yuh're always behind," Jacklin said sarcastically. "Here's the corpse of the man that killed Greg Seward. If yuh was on your job, Sheriff, you'd found him yourself."

"Lannon said that you shot him," Landers puffed, his eyes bulging with agitation.

"I did," Jacklin replied. "Routledge, here, got all the evidence against him that was needed." He turned to Baze, something of apology in his tones, and said, "I suppose you could have taken care of him, Routledge, but when I saw him goin' for his gun, I figgered I better let him have it. I didn't know whether you was faster than him, or not."

"It's all right with me," Blaze answered easily. "I never did crave to become a notch-cutter."

"As far as bein' faster slingin' lead than Limpy Joe," Turk declared loyally, "I'm puttin' my money on Blaze any day!"

Sheriff Landers turned and for the first time saw Cotton and Turk. "Huh! You two again, eh?" he grunted. "I ain't forgot yuh tried to shoot me this mornin', pretendin' like yuh was drunk. For two cents I'd run yuh in!"

"Aw, go chew your finger-nails," Turk growled, while Cotton added, "Come on, just try an' run us in, Windy, I'm li'ble to take another shot at yuh!"

"You'll what!" Landers gasped. His anger gained the upper hand and he burst into a spasm of profanity.

"Sheriff," Cotton drawled, "your language ain't fit to eat. Yuh better keep your mouth shut!"

"That's good advice, Landers," Jacklin cut in sharply. "You get busy and have this body taken out of here." He turned to Blaze. "I wish you and your boys would

come up to my office," he proposed. "I'd like to talk over a couple of things with you."

"I'm open to suggestion," Blaze answered, wondering what Jacklin had to say that couldn't be said right in the barroom.

Jacklin led the way, as Blaze, Turk and Cotton followed him up the flight of stairs to his office, which was situated on the balcony. Here two rooms were partitioned off. One served as sleeping quarters, and the other held a desk, a safe and four chairs. The door of the office was fitted with a long glass panel, that Jacklin might sit at his desk and still see what was going on downstairs.

A bottle of liquor and glasses were produced. Jacklin poured the drinks after the men were seated. "To begin with," the owner of the Chuckaluck commenced a few minutes later, "I want to tell you, Routledge, that I'm mighty glad that you're here. We need you."

"Yeah?" Blaze answered noncommittally. "What for?"

"To help settle Cougar," Jacklin answered. "Things are in a pretty bad way here. There's a lawless element that's been runnin' things to suit itself—"

"Meanin' th' Black Riders?" Blaze asked.

Jacklin nodded. "You've heard of them?"

"Yeah, Turk an' Cotton told me what they knew. I'm admittin' it wasn't much—"

"I'm surprised that you heard anything," Jacklin put in. Then to the two punchers, "I'm congratulatin' you on your nerve in mentionin' the Riders. Most people hereabouts are afraid to talk about them."

"Th' sooner I can see 'em face to face," Turk growled, "th' better I'll like it. I'm hopin' to trade lead with 'em some day."

"Make it a double order on that dish," Cotton drawled. "I ain't afraid of no hombre that's afraid to show his face, an' what rides around in a black nightshirt in th' bargain!"

"You know what they look like, then?" Jacklin asked in surprise.

"Never saw 'em myself," Cotton replied promptly, "but I was talkin' to a feller what saw 'em ridin' outa town that night after they busted th' safe in th' express office. This feller tells me they had long black robes on that covered 'em from th' top of their head to their boots, but was split part way, so's they could fork a saddle."

Jacklin laughed. "Sounds like a masquerade party," he said incredulously. "Who told you that?"

"Me, I'm not sayin'," Cotton yawned. "I ain't aimin' to get any of my friends in a jam."

"Yuh're right, at that," Jacklin replied promptly. "I don't blame you a bit."

He reached into a drawer of the desk and produced a box of cigars. Blaze and his friends refused with a shake of the head, and commenced rolling cigarettes.

"It's like this," Jacklin commenced slowly, when he had selected a weed and lighted it, "I know I'm not very popular with some people in this town. Because I have an interest in several of the games, outside the Chuckaluck, people seem to be suspicious of me. In fact," and here he paused impressively, "it has come to my ears that I'm suspected of being chief of the Black Riders. Of course, there's nothing in that."

Blaze smiled. "I gota hunch you're askin' me what I think, Jacklin."

"Exactly," Jacklin answered frankly.

"I'll come clean for yuh," Blaze answered. "I did kinda have that idea at first."

"What did yuh base it on?" Jacklin asked quietly.

"Mighty little, I'm admittin'," Blaze replied. "Mostly, from all I can learn, th' trouble started since you came to Cougar. After you bein' so quick in workin' law on Limpy Joe, I've changed my mind."

Jacklin nodded. "I'm glad to hear that. Now I'll give you further proof." He reached into a drawer of his desk and produced a paper which he handed to Blaze with the comment, "That came for me in the mail."

Cotton and Turk rose and came to Blaze's shoulder to see what it was. It read:

> Cameo Jacklin, you ain't wanted in Cougar no longer. You better get while the gettins good. Don't try to take your money neither.
>
> Riders of the Black Skull

The words were printed in lead pencil on an ordinary piece of wrapping paper. Below the words, in the lower left hand corner, was a crudely-drawn death's-head. Blaze studied it for some minutes, before handing it back to Jacklin. "That skull an' cross-bones sure don't look cheerful," he commented at last. "I reckon this proves you ain't chief of the gang."

"Thought it would convince you," Jacklin replied.

"What yuh goin' to do about it?" Blaze asked next.

"I'm not sure yet," Jacklin said slowly. "One thing is certain, I don't intend to get out—at least, not right away. You can see now, Routledge, why I'm anxious to have you stay. I need help."

Without replying directly, Blaze changed the subject slightly, "Who do you think is chief of the Riders?" he asked. "Got any ideas?"

"Not one."

"I had some little trouble with Idaho Lannon an' a coupla his friends to-day when I hit town," Blaze continued. "They seemed surprised—"

Jacklin nodded. "I heard somethin' about that," he interrupted.

"Mebbe yuh heard, then," Blaze resumed, "about a coupla fellers tryin' to dry-gulch me on Skeleton Pass. One of 'em, I know, is a friend of Lannon's."

A look of concern crept into Jacklin's face. "That's news to me," he said seriously. "Things are worse than I thought they were. I suppose they were trying to prevent you from coming here. What happened?"

"I plugged one of 'em," Blaze replied. "The other was finished by a rattler, before he could get me. But that's over and done with. What I'm gettin' at is, do yuh suppose there's any chance of Lannon bein' the head of the Black Riders?"

Jacklin looked dubious. "I've thought of that, too," he admitted, "but I don't reckon he is. Lannon ain't got the brains to direct a gang like the Riders—"

"It wouldn't surprise me none," Turk put in, "if Lannon an' his men belonged to the gang."

Jacklin vetoed that, too. "I don't think so. Lannon wants to be a hard hombre, but that's about all." He paused a minute, then turned to Blaze. "Let's get back where we were," he suggested. "I was sayin' that I hoped you'd stay an' take up the fight against the Black Riders. I need protection, so I'm offerin' you five hundred a month to work for me. How about it?"

Blaze shook his head. "I can't see yuh, Jacklin—"

"A thousand a month," Jacklin raised his offer. "I can't go higher—"

"It's not the money," Blaze refused a second time. "My guns aren't for sale. For one thing, I want to get out to see my dad. Ain't seen him in three years. Ranch life suits me a-plenty, an' I don't aim to take up no fight against the Black Riders, unless they start somethin' with me. Yuh're marshal here, an' besides, yuh got Sheriff Landers to help—"

"Oh, Lord," Jacklin groaned. "Landers is no help at all. He'll only be in the way."

"Yuh might try writin' to th' Governor," Blaze suggested. "Have him send some soldiers down here to protect yuh—put th' town under martial law."

"That idea occurred to me, too," Jacklin smiled ruefully, "but I'm afraid to try it. The news would leak out before the troops got here, and I'd be a dead man before they could help."

Blaze rose to his feet. "Well, I can't think of anythin' else, Jacklin," he said. "C'mon, boys we'll be slopin' out to th' ranch. I wanta get home."

"You won't take a hand in the fight, then?" Jacklin asked.

"Who, me?" Blaze answered. "Yuh're dang tootin' I will, if them Riders come messin' around me. So long as they leave me alone, though, I'll mind my own business. So long, Jacklin."

A short time later Blaze and his two companions were mounted and riding out of town. Not one of the three had had a

thing to say since leaving Jacklin's office. Blaze appeared to be lost in deep thought.

"Say, Blaze," Cotton broke the silence at last, as they cut off across the range, "did yuh really mean what yuh said about not fightin', unless th' Black Riders picked on yuh?"

"Cowboy," Blaze said, grinning, "my fight started when we tracked down Greg Seward's murderer. I wasn't tellin' Jacklin' though."

"Yuh didn't fall for th' idea of workin' for him, then?" Turk asked curiously.

"It's not exactly that," Blaze answered, "only so long as I don't know Jacklin so well, there isn't any reason for me showing my hand. He might be in earnest about fightin' the Riders, and then again he might run at the first sign of trouble, or tell everything he knows."

And more than that Blaze wouldn't say, except, "Don't ask me no questions now, fellers. I gotta figger this thing out, first, before I commit myself definite to war talk!"

CHAPTER VIII

"Throw 'Em Up!"

THE three had progressed about a third of the distance to the Rafter R spread, when Blaze swerved his horse off the well-traveled trail and motioned the others to follow him.

"Where yuh headin' now?" Turk wanted to know.

"It just occurred to me," Blaze explained, "that Seward mentioned a short time before he was killed, that he had a girl livin' with him now. I reckon we oughta go over an' break the news. Nobody in town will think of it, or if they do, they'll be too scared to mix into the matter."

"Yuh're sure a glutton for punishment," Cotton drawled, as he and Turk directed their mounts alongside Blaze's, "if yuh take on your shoulders th' business of breakin' sad news to a female. Like as not she'll weep on our breasts, or somethin' like that."

"Have you ever seen her?" Blaze wanted to know.

Turk shook his head. "Nope, an' I don't want to. She's pro'bly some skinny ol' maid that thinks cowpunchers is uncouth. That's th' way most of them Easterners feel."

"She don't never come to town," Cotton supplemented. "Leastwise she never has that I know of. All we heard was, that about five-six months ago Seward had a niece come to live with him. You know as well as me, Blaze, that if she was a likely-lookin' yearlin' she'd have been around showin' herself by this time. Beauty don't allow itself to languish on th' desert air, as th' book says."

Blaze laughed. "Mebbe yuh're right, boys, an' then again, mebbe yuh're all wrong. They's some sorts of beauty that would only be wastin' itself on the desert heirs—meanin' by that, that some of you buckaroos wouldn't know how to appreciate a good-lookin' girl."

"Yeah," Cotton agreed in lazy tones, "there's two kinds of beauty, all right. F'rinstance, th' kind I got, an' th' kind Turk wears. Now Turk wouldn't ring th' bell so hard in genteel society, but just put him in a prize hawg show, an' folks would admit he sure graded up high! I can just hear 'em sayin', 'Ain't he a beauty!'"

"Aw-w," Turk growled, "if I had a map like yours, yuh tow-headed buckle-necked ram, I'd buy me one of them false-faces like kids wears on Halloween Night. Yuh'd look partwise human then, anyway."

"You two better quit complimentin' each other," Blaze broke in with a laugh, "an' see can yuh urge yuh hawsses to somethin' resemblin' speed. We want to get home by supper time."

And with that he kicked his pony in the ribs and darted ahead, the other two spurring to catch up. Gradually, as they proceeded, the waving grass gave way in spots to barren, alkali patches, with only a bit of sage or cactus to relieve the dead grayness of such unfertile places.

Before long Seward's Bar S Bar Ranch hove in sight. It wasn't much of a place as ranches go. There was a one-story ranch house built of timbers and adobe, two

corrals, a barn and a bunkhouse. Two large sycamore trees shaded the front porch of the ranch house, and a short distance to the rear the cowboys could see the top of a windmill. Although Seward's ranch was surrounded by country not any too good for grazing cattle, the land in the immediate vicinity of the buildings was well-carpeted with grass.

As a ranchman, Seward never had measured up very big. He had the ability, but his best friends called him shiftless. They forgot that before "Ma" Seward passed on, Greg had been mighty ambitious. However, of late years, he had taken on a sort of "don't-care" attitude, and it was only since the arrival of his niece that he had once more commenced to take an interest in an existence which was so brutally cut short by an assassin's bullet.

As Blaze and the two cowboys approached the porch of the house a girl rose from a rocking-chair and stood waiting to meet them. A tenderfoot she may have been upon her arrival in the Southwest, but now she looked every inch a product of the country. A divided skirt, small riding boots and mannish flannel shirt showed she was no stranger to the outdoors. A sombrero and quirt lay on the top step of the flight of three leading to the porch.

Her hair, which was black as night, grew closely to her head and framed a small face of olive complexion through which pulsed the rosy flush of health. The girl's teeth weren't small enough to have been termed beautiful, but they were white and even behind the full red lips. She was small, scarcely above five feet tall, with a slim figure that had all the quick, restless activity of a squirrel.

Blaze and his two companions dismounted near the porch. "Howdy, miss," he greeted her, coming up the steps.

"Howdy, stranger," she answered, smiling, giving him her hand. "Uncle Greg went to Cougar early this morning. He isn't back yet, but I expect him most any time."

"Yeah, I know," Blaze replied awkwardly, as he took the girl's hand. He was surprised at the strength of her fingers: in fact, she seemed to fairly radiate life and vitality. "I'm Blaze Routledge."

He was looking into her dark eyes now, trying to learn from their dusky depths the easiest way to break the news of Greg Seward's death. It wasn't going to be a pleasant job, at best, and he finally decided to be direct. This girl could stand that sort of news without fainting, he felt sure.

"I wonder if it's the custom to hold a girl's hand so long when one is introduced out here," she was saying. Blaze felt she was laughing at him, for some reason or other. He released her hand reluctantly.

"'Scuse me, miss," he stammered. "I was just thinkin' that you got a mighty strong grip for a girl."

"Nothing surprising about that," she laughed. "I was an athletic instructor in a girl's school back East. I'm Cynthia Seward, called 'Cyn' for short. Call me 'Sin' if you want to. My friends all do."

"I'm hopin' to place myself among the friends," Blaze said steadily, "by callin' yuh just that—but knowin' there's nothin' appropriate in the name."

For a moment the girl looked into his eyes; then a soft, warm flush suffused the creamy cheeks. They were understanding each other, these two, and the girl realized the intense feeling that lay in Blaze's words. Before she could answer, a series of coughs caught their attention.

Blaze took the hint and turned to the two cowboys: "My friends, Turk Ziegler and Cotton Bale," he introduced them.

Sombrero in hand, and bowing and scraping, the two men ascended to the porch to shake hands with the girl.

"Glad to make your acquaintance, Miss Seward," Cotton said.

"We've heard yuh was livin' here," came from Turk, "but we often wondered why yuh never come to town."

"That was Uncle Greg's fault," Cynthia answered. "He tells me Cougar is a bit uncivilized yet, and he didn't want anything to happen. I don't quite know why he felt that way. I'm capable of taking care of myself."

The thought of what he had come to see the girl about, swept in on Blaze's mind. His face sobered suddenly. "If yuh knew Cougar the way we do," he declared, "you'd understand why Greg didn't want you going to town." He was still wondering how to approach the subject.

"Perhaps," the girl admitted. "I've promised myself to go in, though, one of these days." Her eyes strayed off across the range. "I don't see why Uncle Greg doesn't come."

It could be put off no longer. Blaze cleared his throat, coughed, and made two starts before the words would come. "If —if I was you, Cyn—Miss Cynthia," he said miserably, "I wouldn't count too much on Greg comin'—to-day—"

He broke off, unable to meet the girl's swift glance.

"I don't quite understand," she said, frowning, while she searched Blaze's face for the meaning of his words. Slowly, it dawned on her. "He—he's been hurt?" she queried at last.

Blaze bowed his head.

Cynthia waited a moment for an explanation; then when none came she sensed the tragedy. She gave a quick glance toward the two cowboys, who quickly averted their heads, then said, "Uncle Greg is dead, isn't he?" Her lips trembled over the words but the tones were steady.

Again Blaze bowed his head. "It—it come before we knew what had happened —" he commenced.

The girl tensed suddenly. "The Black Riders?" she asked.

"I reckon so," Blaze answered. "You've heard of them?"

"Uncle Greg told me—oh, it's terrible—why doesn't somebody hunt them down—"

"That's what I figure to do," Blaze announced grimly.

Cynthia gave him a little pain-twisted smile. "It's—it's so sudden," she said in a low voice. "Why should anyone kill Uncle Greg. He never hurt anyone. I—"

She turned to the rocker nearby and lowered herself to its seat. "No, I'm not going to faint," she stated in a firmer voice, as Blaze hastened toward her. "Only it was something of a shock."

"Can't I get you a drink, or somethin'?" he asked.

The girl shook her head. "No, I'm all right. I'll have Juana get one in a minute —Juana is the housekeeper. She's part Mexican, but reliable—"

"Throw 'em up, you hombres! Quick!" came a sudden interruption.

Blaze and his punchers whirled at the sound of the voice. Standing a few feet from the porch was a tall, broad-shouldered man, in range attire, with Colt-gun trained on them!

Cynthia started to her feet. "Don't—don't Gil!" she cried. "It's all right! They're friends."

"Mebbe they are, an' mebbe they aren't," the man answered harshly. "What proof yuh got?"

Before Cynthia could answer, Blaze broke in, "You go in the house and lie down a spell, miss," he said gently. "I'll settle things here."

The girl looked about to refuse, then quite suddenly she bowed her head and slipped past him into the house.

Nothing was said until the girl disappeared. Meanwhile Blaze sized up the man she had called "Gil." Blaze felt uncomfortable; it sounded pretty familiar. He was wondering if this man and Cynthia were engaged. The fellow was rather good-looking; Blaze couldn't deny that. He was well built, with light yellow hair and a small blond mustache. Blaze noted that the bottom of the man's holster was tied to his thigh with a buckskin thong. That denoted quickness on the draw, if nothing else.

Finally as the girl's footsteps passed out of hearing, Blaze spoke to the man with the drawn gun. "Yuh can put that away, pardner," he said easily. "Yuh ain't goin' to have use for it."

"Mebbe yuh're right, but I ain't trustin' yuh none," the fellow growled. "I told yuh once to stick up your hands. If I have to tell yuh th' second time, lead'll be flyin'—"

"An' it'll be flyin' your way as well as mine," Blaze snapped. "Don't be a fool. Yuh might plug me, but they's more of us that'd smoke yuh up before yuh got

fairly started. Use your head an' put that gun away. I want to talk to you."

For a full minute the man hesitated, then he slowly lowered the gun and dropped it back into holster. "All right," he consented grudgingly. "I'm prob'ly a damn' fool, but I'm outnumbered. Who are you birds, anyway?"

"We're all from the Rafter R," Blaze answered promptly. "I'm Blaze Routledge; these two hombres are Turk Ziegler and Cotton Bale. If that satisfies yuh, I'd like to hear th' sound of your name."

"I'm Gilbert Jors," the man answered, a trifle sullenly. "Miss Seward's cousin. I'm workin' as foreman for Greg—"

"Darn' queer," Cotton drawled. "I didn't know Greg had a foreman. How come yuh never git to town, feller?"

"Haven't had time. I've only been here about four months—"

"Haven't had time?" Turk exclaimed. "Last I knew, Greg only had two punchers an' a cook workin' for him, an' he was doin' th' foreman act hisself. Don't seem to me all that help would keep yuh so busy!"

Jors' face darkened. "We'll put it this way, an' just say I didn't care nothin' about goin' to town, then," he answered shortly.

"Dang unusual," Cotton put in, "but it sounds a heap more truthful, Jors."

"Where you from?" Blaze asked quietly.

Jors flashed him what might be termed a "dirty look." "Say, what is this," he growled, "a third degree yuh're tryin' to put me through?"

"I'm askin' yuh," Blaze repeated steadily. "where you're from? You can answer or not, just as you please, An honest man wouldn't hesitate. And don't go for your smoke-pole, neither. It's three to one, remember!"

Jors hastily removed his hand from the gun butt where it had strayed. "If yuh're insistin'," he replied reluctantly, "I'm tellin' yuh Montana—and Wyoming and Colorado. I've worked cattle in all them states."

"Kinda vague," Blaze said dryly, "but it'll do." His voice changed. "Now, look here, Jors, don't think we come here to make trouble. We didn't! It's just that I ain't trustin' nobody. Mebbe I'm like you in that respect—"

"I've heard of th' Rafter R an' you three fellers, of course," Jors said. "Greg told me about yuh. Howsomever, how am I to know that's who yuh really are."

"Until we can furnish proof," Blaze responded calmly. "Yuh'll have to take our word for it!"

Jors seemed easier in his mind now. "I wouldn't have thrown down on you fellers like that," he said, "if I'd known who yuh were. Things is pretty unsettled in these parts—" He checked himself suddenly.

"Yuh're not tellin' us a thing we don't know," Blaze said grimly. "What we come here for was to tell Miss Seward that Greg had been killed—"

"Good Lord!" Jors muttered. His face turned ashen. "You don't mean it."

"I'm not in the habit of saying things I don't mean," Blaze answered. He was trying to decide whether or not Jors' agitation was real or simulated.

"I been half expectin' somethin' like that," Jors stated after a minute.

"From th' Black Riders?" Blaze shot the question.

The man started nervously, gnawed at his small mustache, then finally answered, "Yes."

"Why?"

"Why? Well, yuh see—er—that is—"

"Th' gent seems to be havin' trouble with his words," Turk broke in.

"Why, wouldn't I have trouble speaking?" Jors said, more frankly. "This come so sudden. 'Course, as I say, it was to be expected, not for any particular reason, but because th' Riders pro'bly knew Greg was for puttin' 'em outa business, even if he didn't say much." He turned to Blaze again. "I suppose as usual they don't know who done it?"

"And that's where yuh're supposin' wrong," Blaze declared definitely. "A feller by th' name of Limpy Joe Simkins did th' work. We trailed him down. Cameo Jacklin, with the authority of marshal to back his play, killed Limpy Joe on the spot, just as he was drawin' on me?"

"Cameo Jacklin?" Jors exclaimed. Try

as he would he couldn't keep the surprise out of his voice.

Blaze nodded. "Jacklin acted right prompt, I'll tell the world. Anyway, that's one Black Rider that won't fork no more saddles on a hell-bent job! Jacklin has recent taken on the duties of Cougar's marshal."

"I'm—I'm glad to hear it," Jors muttered. Plainly something was puzzling the man.

"Yuh sure show it," Cotton said with dry humor.

Jors glared at the cowboy a moment, then decided to disregard the words. "Where's Greg—where's th' body now?" he asked Blaze.

"At Leach's Undertakin' Parlors. If there's anythin' we can do, say the word. We stand to help your outfit, of course."

"Much obliged," Jors answered ungraciously, "but I reckon we can get along, all right, without *your* help."

Blaze shrugged his shoulders. "That's up to you, feller. I'm just tellin' yuh that we're willin' to do what we can." He hesitated a moment, then went on, "Here's somethin' else you an' Miss Seward can think over: it's my advice that you move over to th' Rafter R. We got a lot of room there, and you'll be a heap safer. Under present conditions, this ain't no place for a girl."

Jors' temper rose at the words. "I think I'm capable of decidin' that," he snapped. "Cynthia'll be all right here. 'Tain't as if she was alone. We got a breed-woman that can take care of her. We'll be stayin'—"

Blaze's eyes narrowed. "Jors," he stated in no uncertain tones, "nobody but a damn' fool would think of lettin' that girl stay here now. If you don't speak to Miss Seward about it, I will!"

"All right," Jors consented reluctantly, "I'll tell her. There won't be no need of you seein' her again."

"That's better," Blaze nodded quietly. "And remember that the offer includes you and the rest of the outfit."

"I can take care of myself," Jors flamed.

Blaze laughed softly. "I reckon yuh can, if yuh feel that way about it. But, regardless of what yuh think of me, use your gray matter. What I'm tellin' yuh is common sense, an' has nothin' to do with whether yuh like me or not. I can see that I ain't popular with yuh. Well, th' feelin' is unanimous."

"Suits me," Jors answered, his eyes not meeting Blaze's.

Blaze turned to his companions. "I reckon that's all, boys. We'll be driftin'."

Cotton and Turk nodded and followed him down the steps where they hoisted themselves to the horses' backs.

Just before starting, Blaze turned back and saw Jors scowling savagely at him. "Yuh didn't remember to ask, Jors," he called, "but for your information I'm tellin' yuh that th' bullet that killed Greg come from a rifle equipped with a silencer. That surprise yuh?"

Jors laughed shortly and shook his head. "Not so much," he stated, looking Blaze full in the eye, "I suspected somethin' like that. Greg kept me informed right along on th' mysterious deaths caused by guns that didn't make no noise. If people wa'n't so dumb, they'd have thought of it long ago. Th' question is, did yuh find th' rifle with th' silencer."

"Not yet, but I'm intendin' to," Blaze answered.

Jors looked relieved in spite of himself. "Well, don't stop breathin' until yuh do," he advised sarcastically.

Blaze pulled to a sudden halt, yanked his mount around. "What yuh meanin' by that?" he demanded. "Do you know where it is?"

"If I did," Jors said coolly, "I'd produce it, wouldn't I?"

"And that's somethin' I'm doubtin' a heap," Blaze snapped. He considered a moment, then said, "Jors, I'm goin' to know more about you one of these days. Until then, yuh'd better watch your step!"

But the only answer he received was a mocking laugh as Jors turned and went into the house.

Blaze frowned as he again swung his horse alongside Turk and Cotton and the three spurred their mounts to action. "Now there's one hombre that I don't dope out," he stated slowly.

"If I was you," Turk suggested, "I'd throw him into th' jail and take a chance on explainin' later—"

"Yuh're forgettin' again," Blaze reminded wearily, "that I ain't sheriff no more. He's got as much right around these parts as you and I have."

"Well, what in th' name of th' seven bald steers we goin' to do?" Turk queried hopelessly. "If we ain't got no law on our side—an' nobody but a cock-eyed wangdoodle would consider Windy Landers th' law—how we goin' to settle this thing?"

"Them as lives by th' six-gun, shall perish by th' six-gun," Cotton paraphrased softly.

"Cotton's right, Turk," Blaze declared. "Th' only law we got is packed on our hips. When th' time comes we'll use it." There was a tinge of bitterness in his laugh. "Law? Hell! There don't seem to be none right now. This is a gun country, cowboy, an' th' Lord pity him that ain't got no gun when the showdown comes."

"But when's it comin'?" Turk demanded impatiently. "I'm gettin' plumb weary—" A sudden exclamation from Cotton checked the sentence. He turned, then asked, "What yuh givin' me a dirty look for, Cotton?"

"I didn't give yuh no dirty look," Cotton protested. "Yuh always had it! What's gettin' me is th' way yuh're howlin' for action. Yuh forget Blaze only arrived today. Give him time. You'n me been here right along, an' we ain't done nothin'—"

Turk didn't have an immediate answer for that. Finally he said humbly, "I'm plumb sorry, Blaze. I wasn't tryin' to be critical, only I'm so used to yuh wearin' a star an' tearin' into things, that I kinda forgot yuh're plumb handicapped now."

Blaze laughed as he spurred to Turk's side. "Forget it, yuh warp-legged, sheep-herdin' old pack-mule. I know yuh wasn't criticizing." He reached across with a sudden movement and yanked Turk's hat down over the cowboy's eyes. "C'mon, supper's a-waitin' if we fan our tails a mite. Shake your hawse's hocks, puncher."

CHAPTER IX

JORS OR JACKLIN—WHICH?

OLD Dan Routledge was probably the most affluent rancher in the Cougar country, as the range land surrounding the town of Cougar was generally known. For legal purposes, elections, and so on, 'Titus County' was in general use, but otherwise this section was usually referred to as the Cougar country. Routledge had been the first man to settle there, and, consequently, had been able to secure the pick of the locations.

Situated some twelve miles due south of Cougar, in a spot that would have made any true cattleman's heart beat a trifle faster, lay the Rafter R Ranch buildings. For miles in every direction little else but waving lush grass met the eye, and three hundred yards from the front of the house, at the foot of a long green slope, was a cottonwood-fringed stream known as Sweetwater Creek.

Routledge's first ranch house, of timbers chinked with mud, had long since been replaced by a more pretentious two-story establishment of Spanish architecture, constructed of adobe, and built in the form of a big hollow square. Routledge had money and he believed in spending it to make himself comfortable. The furnishings of the house, while not ornate, were designed to give an atmosphere of hominess. The floors were of hardwood, covered with animal skins and Navajo rugs. Here and there on the walls were paintings by Remington, and other famous cowboy artists. There wasn't what could be termed a small room in the house. The hollow square, inside the walls, formed a patio which was cool on the hottest day. Here were chairs and a table at which Routledge was wont to spend the long drowsy afternoons, when work didn't call him elsewhere.

Some there were who referred to the big ranch house as Routledge's "hotel." True enough, the place was large enough to house a score or more of guests, and on many occasions had. Its owner's hospitality was known from one end of the cow country to the other. Wandering

punchers were always sure of a bed and food when they stopped at the Rafter R, and if they usually chose the bunkhouse in preference to one of the many bedrooms, it wasn't Routledge's fault. They were welcome to sleep where they chose, eat as much as they could hold, and stay as long as the fancy pleased them.

Some short distance back of the ranch house was the combination cook shanty, dining room and bunkhouse, while situated nearby were stables, corrals, barns, blacksmith shop and other buildings necessary to the efficient operation of a high-grade cattle outfit.

Blaze, accompanied by Cotton and Turk, had arrived at the Rafter R just in time for supper. Although the ranch house boasted a large dining room and kitchen, Old Dan Routledge preferred to eat with his outfit in its own dining room, unless he had guests. Here Blaze had found him, together with the dozen or so punchers that made up the force. There was nothing effusive about the greeting of Blaze and his father; neither was the man to show his affections, and a casual observer might have thought that Blaze had been away no more than a day or so, instead of three years. In fact, the Rafter R punchers had made for more fuss over Blaze's return than did Dan Routledge.

Supper over, Routledge rose to his feet. He was a lean, spare, grizzled veteran of the range with snow-white hair and long sweeping mustaches of the same color. His eyebrows—also white—were thick and bushy, and fairly bristled above the keen blue eyes. His nose was long and aquiline; the lips and jaw firm. Despite his well-worn range attire, there was a certain dignity about Dan Routledge. Anyone could have told at a glance that here was a natural born leader of men, a fighter and a "square-shooter." Regardless of his position, Routledge worked as hard as any of his men. He didn't believe in an owner letting himself go soft. Probably that was the reason his step was as springy and youthful as that of any man in the room.

"Better come up to the house, boy," he said to Blaze. "I want to talk to you a mite. What you've told me about the Black Riders and them two tryin' to drygulch yuh on Skeleton Pass, is causin' me a heap of thought. Cotton, you an' Turk come along. Yuh was mixed in them doin's an' th' killin' of Greg Seward."

Blaze nodded. "See yuh some more, fellers," he said to the others in the room.

They were a serious-faced group of men. Their whoops of joy at Blaze's arrival had quickly stopped when he related the events of the past few hours.

"We want to see you some more, too, Blaze," put in Terry Larrabee, the Rafter R foreman, "not only here, but we're cravin' to see yuh get into action an' put an end to them snakes."

Blaze turned at the door and glanced back at Larrabee, who was a middle-aged, stockily-built individual. "I'll be doin' my best, Terry," he smiled, "an' I'm countin' on all you Rafter R waddies to help me out."

Larrabee nodded. "That goes without sayin'. We're behind yuh from start to finish—"

"I'll tell th' world we are!" an enthusiastic puncher yelled.

"Nothin' else!" from another.

And that started it. Cries of loyalty arose from every puncher in the long dining room, and the men swarmed around Blaze to shake his hand again.

Blaze was finally allowed to leave. Dan Routledge turned in the doorway to tell Larrabee to join them at the house later, then the owner of the Rafter R fell into step with his son and the two cowboys.

Overhead the sky was clear, dotted here and there with twinkling stars. The moon wasn't up, as yet. All the way to the house, Blaze and his father were silent, although Turk and Cotton kept up their usual persiflage.

Once in the living room, Routledge proceeded to light the old-fashioned oil lamps. Electricity was the one modern feature he had refused to install. A box of cigars and a bottle were placed upon a table, and chairs were drawn up. Blaze was the last to seat himself. He wandered about the room, looking at pictures, touching the furniture, and in other ways resuming

his old acquaintance with the house. "Gosh," he grinned, "it's good to be home again, dad."

"What yuh been doin' th' past three years?" Dan asked.

Blaze removed his cartridge belts and guns, laid them on the mantel over the big stone fireplace, then returned to the table and dropped into a chair. "Mostly travelin'," he answered.

Dan Routledge sighed. "You always was hankerin' to be on the move. I've often wished yuh wasn't so restless. Anythin' unusual turn up while yuh was away? Had any gun slingin' to keep yuh busy, or anythin'."

"Not much to speak of," Blaze returned. "I been workin' for various outfits here and there. Seen a heap of country. Cleared up a murder mystery over in Idaho. Helped settle a little town in Colorado, that was overrun with gamblers and gunmen. Wasn't much to speak of though—"

"No, probably not," Cotton broke in with good-humored sarcasm. "I'm cravin' to hear th' stories back of them two affairs, Blaze."

"You're shoutin', cowboy," Turk supplemented. "Seems to me that Blaze was cut out for a law-an'-order man. He can get a job sheriffin' or detectin' any time he wants it. I want to hear about your expuriences, too, Blaze."

Blaze smiled. "That's somethin' that'll have to come some other time, Turk. Right now we got plenty of serious business ahead, and until everything is cleared up and the Black Riders wiped out of the way, I'm not going to have much time to be spinnin' windies with you." He paused suddenly, then to his father, "Dad, yuh didn't mention in your letter about gettin' shot." There was something of reproach in his voice now. "Ever since Cotton told me, I been kickin' myself for not comin' home sooner. I could have taken th' train just as well as not. Your letter took about a month to find me, as it was. I sloped toward home th' same day it arrived."

"As far as gettin' plugged was concerned," Dan Routledge answered, "there wasn't much to it. It happened right towards the end of calf round-up. Usually I pay the boys in checks, or let Terry Larrabee go in for the payroll money, but everybody was busy, and I knew there wouldn't be any chance for the outfit to get to town, anyway, so I rode into the bank and got the *dinero* myself. It wasn't such a pile of money to hold a hombre up for, at that. Eight hundred dollars odd, that's all."

"Who was it tried to hold you up?" Blaze asked. "The Black Riders?"

Old Dan shrugged his shoulders. "Yuh got me. If it was, they didn't have their black suits on. I've thought more'n once that it wasn't a regular job planned by the Rider's leader. They'd had more than three men on hand, if that had been the case. I was ridin' easy, thinkin' th' boys would be glad to have some money to play 'draw' with, when all of a sudden these three jaspers jump out at me from behind a clump of chaparral.

" 'Course, I knowed what was afoot th' minute they called on me to stop. It was kinda dark, so I got my hawg-laig to workin' almost before they plugged me. Naturally I wasn't stoppin'. I made a runnin' fight of it. They got me in th' shoulder and right laig. Got a little limp left to remember 'em by, but that's all th' affair amounted to. I heard one of 'em yell when I threw down on him, but don't know how bad he was hit. Th' main thing was that I got th' boys' money to 'em on payday."

Blaze looked serious. "I'm damn glad it wasn't no worse."

Dan Routledge nodded shortly. "We can forget it." He paused a minute while Terry Larrabee entered the room. "Draw up a chair, Terry, an' stick one of these perfectos into your face."

Larrabee lighted a cigar, and then found a seat. "Talkin' about th' Black Riders, I'll bet a mess of hop-toads," he said.

Dan Routledge inclined his head. "It's the topic that's most in my mind these days," he observed slowly. "So far—aside from losin' some beef critters—the Rafter R ain't been bothered. I ain't lost nearly so many as some of the ranchers."

"Mebbe the Black Riders is afraid to tackle the Rafter R," Cotton suggested. "We're fairly strong on men here, and—"

"I don't think that's it," Larrabee interposed. "To my way of thinkin', the bandits have been concentratin' on stores, stage routes, and things like that. After them sources has been milked clean, they'll commence raidin' th' bigger ranches like they have the smaller ones."

"Sounds fairly reasonable, at that," Routledge answered. "That's one thing I wanted yuh home for, Blaze. I can lead men when it comes to scrappin', but when real hard work is necessary, I like you to be on the job—"

"And that's somethin' else we won't go into right now," said Blaze smiling. "Until I've discovered somethin', let's forget my detectin' abilities. What I don't understand, mostly, is why the Black Riders kill off some folks without warnin', and others just gets a warnin' to leave town."

"It's the folks that talk the most," Larrabee supplied, "that gets knocked off. I don't suppose the Riders like to do no more killin' than is absolutely necessary, though. It's always better to scare off th' ones that get scrappy, if it can be worked. Too many killin's draw attention, 'specially it it's well-known hombres that get killed. Take yourself, for instance. You're well-known and popular in Cougar. If they was to murder you, th' people would rise up, thinkin' their last hope was gone, an' demand that soldiers be sent down here. On t'other hand, they don't think nothin' 'bout bumpin' off a little feller like Greg Seward. But, in your case, Blaze, they'd be better satisfied if they could scare yuh into leavin'."

"The Riders have just about reached their limit, now," Dan Routledge stated grimly. "We've all sat back and let 'em get away with a heap of crime. It seems to me the time has come to fight fire with fire. Sheriff Landers has proved absolutely worthless since he took office, although he seemed like a pretty good man before that, so we'll just take things into our own hands!"

"With our own outfit, we've got a good crowd to depend on," Blaze put in. "I note none of the boys has left since I was here last. That's a good record, and we can trust every one of 'em—"

"Cotton was sayin' a week or so back," Dan Routledge broke in, "that he sort of suspected Cameo Jacklin of being the chief of the Black Riders. Now, to-night at supper, he told me he'd cut loose from that idea."

"There doesn't seem anythin' else for me to do," Cotton explained. "Look how quick Jacklin acted when he killed Limpy Joe. We're practically sure that Limpy was one of the Riders. Jacklin wouldn't kill his own man. Not only that, but he offered Blaze a job at a thousand dollars a month to fight the Riders—but there's no use going through that again. Blaze told you the whole story."

Blaze smiled. "Just for the sake of an argument," he proposed, "we'll pretend that Jacklin is, in reality, the chief of the Black Riders and that Limpy Joe was acting under his orders when he killed Greg Seward."

"Yes, go on," Dan Routledge answered. The other men were sitting a bit straighter now, a light of sudden interest showing in their faces. This sounded like the old Blaze Routledge, the man who reasoned things out on a logical basis.

"All right, you've got that much straight," Blaze continued. "Now, to-day, when I approached Limpy Joe, I had no intention of throwing lead with him. He started to draw first. I tried to grab his arm. In fact, I would have been able to stop his shot, or at least cause it to go wild. Cameo Jacklin didn't give me time, though. He killed Limpy Joe, before I had an opportunity to interfere. Think that over."

"We've got it straight," Routledge nodded. "What next?"

"If I had been able to capture Limpy Joe alive," Blaze went on, "I would have questioned him, and under threat of death I believe he would have confessed who his chief was."

"No doubt of that," Turk put in.

Blaze fairly hurled the next words at his audience: "If that's the case, then

you have the reason for Cameo Jacklin's killing Limpy Joe so quickly!"

"By God! You've hit it!" Larrabee burst out. "Jacklin killed off the evidence before it could do him any harm!"

"Always providin'," Cotton pointed out, "that Jacklin is really the head of the gang. I ain't forgettin' that he offered Blaze good money to fight 'em."

Blaze laughed shortly. "I can dispose of that easy enough, Cotton. If I'd taken that job from Jacklin, I'd been under his orders. In other words, he'd have known where I was every minute and could keep an eye on me. As it is now, he'll be all up in the air as to what moves I'm makin'."

"And with your reputation," Dan Routledge commented shrewdly, "it would be worth a thousand dollars a month to Jacklin just to have yuh where he could watch yuh."

Turk leaped from his seat. "Let's go into Cougar right now, an' take up this Jacklin hombre!" His face was working with anger.

"Don't go rushin' off half-cocked," Blaze advised. "Remember, we ain't got no proof of anythin' yet, an' so long as we ain't got the law back of us, Turk, we're outa luck without proof. Yuh're plumb forgettin' that I said we'd just *pretend* that Jacklin was chief of the gang."

"Don't pay no 'tention to his ravin's, Blaze," Cotton said. "He's always jumpin' to conclusions—"

Turk turned wrathfully on his partner. "How yuh figgerin' that? Huh? I'm askin' yuh?"

"Ain't yuh plumb overlooked th' fact that Jacklin, hisself, got a warnin' note, tellin' him to leave, from th' Black Riders?" Cotton reminded.

Turk's face fell as he resumed his seat. "Gosh, I sure did forget that," he muttered sheepishly.

"All of which doesn't mean a thing—mebbe," Blaze smiled. "There's nothin' to prevent Jacklin from writing himself a note, just to throw us off'n the track, is there?"

It was Cotton's turn to be crest-fallen. He threw up his hands in disgust. "When it comes to bein' dumb," he exclaimed, "they ain't nobody got nothin' on me. Hereafter, I'll keep my mouth shut until I at least know my A B C's!"

Turk was grinning broadly at Cotton, but before he had an opportunity to "razz" him, Dan Routledge broke in. "Well, in a way, that puts the matter up to Cameo Jacklin. On the other hand we haven't a mite of proof that all them things is so."

"Not a bit," Blaze affirmed. "Jacklin may be as innocent as any of us. I'll say one thing for him, he seems sincere. We'll just have to play this string out a little farther, until we got somethin' definite to go on."

Routledge looked gloomy. "It sure looks like a hopeless proposition," he said slowly, "unless this feller, Gilbert Jors, that yuh say is workin' at Seward's place, is th' trump card we're lookin' for."

"I ain't makin' any guesses where Jors is concerned," Blaze answered, "but I'm doin' a heap of thinkin' about that hombre. He seemed almighty well pleased, when I told him we hadn't found that silencer rifle—"

"Put your hands in the air! Quick!" came a sudden interruption in ugly tones.

At the sound of the voice, Blaze and his companions whirled in their chairs to determine who had given the order.

Standing in the front doorway was a tall masked figure, all in black. In either hand the man held a leveled six-shooter that thoroughly covered the room. Slowly, but with no hesitation, Blaze and his companions elevated their arms.

CHAPTER X

The Rafter R Gets Warning

THERE was nothing else to be done. Blaze's belts and Colt forty-fives lay across the room on the mantel. The others had removed their guns some time before. Contrary to general opinion, the cowboy doesn't wear his artillery during every waking hour.

One by one other figures in black followed their leader into the room, until there was something like a dozen of them clustered about the door. All held drawn

guns, ready for action. Each was clad in a long black robe that slipped over the head and covered his figure down to the heels, completely disguising its wearer. The lower part of the costume was split, like a divided skirt, to allow freedom of movement in the saddle. Guns and cartridge belts were worn on the outside in the usual manner.

The hoods covered not only the face, but the entire head, fitting closely, that a hat might be worn, and were equipped with openings at the eyes, nose and mouth, thus forming a convenient mask that fitted quite closely to the features. The wearer's undergarments could not be seen. Criminals have often been apprehended, despite the use of masks, because someone recognized their shirts or trousers, but here, nothing of the kind was in view. The Black Riders were disguised from top to toe. Gleaming eyes showed through the mask slits, but nothing more, except where a few of the Riders had left off their gloves.

The Rafter R men sat silently in their chairs, hands above heads, while the Black Riders filed into the room. Blaze broke the silence first:

"We seem to have visitors," he said dryly.

"Keep your mouth shut until you're spoken to!" came an order from the leader who stood a foot or so in advance of his men.

"Me, I'm not saying a word," Blaze grinned. Inwardly, however, he was feeling anything but safe as he gazed into the evil eyes that met his own through the mask holes.

"Where's th' masquerade party, feller?" Cotton drawled insolently. "I'm cravin' to go, if I can get me a suit. I wouldn't want nothin' that'd hide my map, though. I ain't ashamed of my face—"

"Silence!" thundered the leader, tilting his gun threateningly.

"Aw, yuh ain't got th' guts to shoot," Turk snapped. "Yuh'd be afraid of bringin' th' boys from th' bunkhouse up here."

"There are plenty of our comrades outside to take care of them," the figure in black answered. "Do as we say, and none of you shall be harmed."

Blaze had been hoping that some of the men from the bunkhouse might come up to see his father, but there seemed to be little chance of that. He could hear the punchers' voices raised in song, and dimly to his ears came the *plunk-plunk* of a guitar.

The voice of the bandit leader broke in on his thoughts. "You, Blaze Routledge, have offended the Riders of the Black Skull. You have meddled with our plans and voiced threats against us. The penalty for this is death! However, we have voted to give you another chance. Clear out of the country at once, and nothing will happen to you. The same order includes the rest of you men—"

"You and your Riders of the Black Skull can go plumb to hell!" Blaze cried heatedly. "If you aim to stop me from runnin' you down, you'd better start slingin' your lead pronto!"

"You'll have twenty-four hours to think it over," the black figure contined imperturbably. "Don't make any rash decisions now. If you stay, it means death—but not a sudden death from a bullet. Yours will be a slow lingering affair. And that, too, applies to all of you men!"

Old Dan Routledge was struggling to keep down his wrath. Now for the first time since the Black Riders entered the house he opened his lips, "Damn yuh, for a dirty bunch of buzzards!" he raged. "We'll be fightin' until scum like you is wiped off'n the range!"

The leader disregarded this. Turning, he spoke to two of his men, "Tie 'em up!"

"Yuh ain't tyin' me!" Larrabee snapped.

"Take it easy, Terry, take it easy," Blaze advised coolly. "We're outnumbered, they got the drop on us, and the rest of the outfit couldn't get here in time to save us. This is once we'll have to use our heads."

"Use your heads about going away, and you'll be safe," the leader of the Black Riders put in.

The Rafter R men said nothing more. Two of the Black Siders advanced with short lengths of rope in their hands, and

in a few minutes Blaze and his companions were bound firmly in their chairs.

Then, one by one, the black robed figures melted out of the room and into the night. At last, only their leader was left. "Adios, hombres," he said, backing through the doorway. "I'm advising that you give plenty of thought to what I've said." And with that, he, too, disappeared from view, a mocking laugh floating back over his shoulder.

For a moment silence reigned, then Blaze grinned. "They sure did put it over on us that time, but I reckon their bluff won't work." He raised his voice, "Hey, the bunkhouse! Bat! Paddy! Swede! Dunk! Come a runnin', cowboys!"

At that moment from outside came the thundering reports of many six-guns being fired in the air; then the sounds of horses getting under way.

"No use hollerin' any more," Dan Routledge said grimly. "That noise'll bring the boys."

Blaze nodded as he listened to the staccato pounding of rapidly retreating hoofs. "I reckon them Black Riders just wanted to tie us up until they could make a getaway. Pro'bly figured to throw a scare into us."

"Well, this is one scare that won't work," Dan Routledge stated grimly. He tugged at his bonds, "Why in the devil don't them boys come?"

"Sit tight, dad, sit tight," Blaze advised. "No use gettin' het up now. The boys'll be here any minute. I can hear 'em comin' now."

"Yes, I can hear 'em, too," Terry Larrabee grumbled, "but I can't hear th' hoofs of them Black Riders' hawsses no longer. They've covered distance fast."

"With the start they got," Turk put in moodily, "we wouldn't have no chance to catch 'em, even if we was free an' on our broncs right this minute—"

His words were interrupted by the sound of running feet as men poured into the room, some coming through the house from the back, and others entering by the front door through which the Black Riders had left a short time before.

At sight of the bound figures in the chairs, the cowboys stopped short, eyes bulging and mouths open in amazement.

"Wha—what happened?" gasped Bat Kenyon, a short, fat roly-poly type of puncher who always wore huge batwing chaps. None of the men had yet made a move to release Blaze and the others.

"Snap into it, Bat," Blaze ordered tersely, "an' tie us loose pronto! We got a ride ahead." Bat was so amazed that he could only stand and stare.

Two of the punchers, Paddy Burke and Dunk Faniel advanced and commenced untying the ropes. A moment more and the captives were set free.

"Yes, it was the Black Riders," Dan Routledge was saying ruefully, "They come up here to give us a scare. We all got warnin's to leave the country—"

He was interrupted by a volley of questions. For a few minutes all was confusion. Blaze was the coolest man in the lot. He had already donned his belts and six-guns, and, with strips of rawhide, was engaged in tying the bottom of his holsters to his thighs.

Running fingers along belt loops to make certain he had plenty of cartridges, Blaze straightened and turned to Swede Johnson, a tall, yellow-haired puncher who stood near. "Swede, take a coupla boys with yuh an' go saddle up a hawss for me will you? Get mounts for Cotton an' Turk, too."

"Ain't we all goin'?" Bat Kenyon asked disappointedly, coming to himself at last.

"No use," Blaze returned. "With th' start them Riders got, we couldn't catch 'em, anyway. Th' three of us will ride into Cougar and take a look-see around to find out how th' ground lays."

Swede Johnson's face fell, but he made no objections as he started for the door. Cotton started after him. "I'll go too. I gotta get my gun, anyhow. C'mon, Turk."

"What yuh aimin' to do, Blaze," Routledge asked his son a few minutes later. "Amble into town and find out if Cameo Jacklin has been away from the Chuckaluck this evenin'?"

Blaze nodded grimly. "It he has, there's liable to be some lead-slingin'. I'd say for all of us to go, but we don't know but

what that's just what the Black Riders want. They was headin' toward Cougar when they left, but mebbe they might stop a few miles from town, wait for us to go past, then return and loot the house."

"Yuh're usin' your head, Blaze," Routledge agreed. "I hadn't thought of that." And then, a few minutes later, "That leader's voice didn't sound nohow like Jacklin's."

"That's the way I figured it, too, Dad," Blaze answered. "But it was so disguised, that it would be pretty hard to tell whose voice it was, even if we knew him. For all the resemblance there was to Jacklin's voice, it might just as well have been a cow bellerin'."

"From now on," one of the punchers suggested, "I should think it would be a good idea to keep a coupla men on guard every night."

Blaze laughed softly. "It's too bad we didn't think of doin' somethin' like that before. It's a good idea. They sure stole a march on us, and we were the goats. Ten to one they dismounted a short distance from the house, then half the gang came here on foot, leavin' the rest to bring up the horses for a quick getaway. Sounded to me, when they were leavin', like there must have been a coupla dozen riders."

"Eighteen or twenty, anyway," Routledge nodded. "Well, we'll try an' be ready for 'em next time, if they wa'n't bluffin' about givin' us twenty-four hours to leave in. They may be back to-morrow night. If so, we'll all be on th' watch."

"I don't think they'll come in a body again, Dad," Blaze observed. "If they bump us off after our twenty-four hours are up, they'll pro'bly do it one at a time. We're pretty strong here, remember. And another thing: we don't want to get caught without our shootin'-irons again. Yuh better give orders, Dad, that every man is to keep his gun on until he rolls into blankets—"

"An' then, keep it right handy," Larrabee amended.

Routledge turned to the other punchers in the room: "Hear that, boys? From now on yuh're all to pack your hardware. Don't take no chances. If yuh see any strangers snoopin' around—shoot first!"

The cowboys nodded, then glanced sheepishly at each other when it was noted that only three of them had their guns.

"A fine lot you turned out to be," Old Dan commented sarcastically. "All that shootin' goin' on, an' only three of yuh brung your guns."

"Shucks! Dad," Bat Kenyon put in shamefacedly—all of Dan Routledge's outfit called him 'Dad'—"Shucks! That didn't sound like no real shootin' affair, all them snakes firin' t'onct like that. We thought mebbe you an' Blaze an' th' rest was just celebratin' a mite."

Dan Routledge's blue eyes twinkled. "I ain't holdin' it against yuh boys. I don't blame yuh a mite for sheddin' your artillery when yuh come in off'n th' range. Two and a half pounds of steel an' lead can wear a callous on a man's hip-bone, if he don't shuck it once in a while. We'll just have to pack that weight a few more hours, that's all, until this Black Rider business is settled."

"What I don't understand," Dunk Faniel put in, "is how them buzzards had th' nerve to come right into th' house here, with all of us down there in th' bunkhouse—"

Blaze laughed as he settled his sombrero on the back of his head. "That's not hard to figger out, cowboy. In the first place they took us by surprise. In th' second, they had us outnumbered. Thirdly, you cow-nurses was havin' so much fun singin' ribald ballads, that yuh wouldn't have heard us, even if we'd had a chance to yell for yuh—"

"Horses are ready," Turk interrupted from the doorway, "an' so are we, Blaze."

"Be right with yuh, Turk," Blaze answered, starting for the door. He turned to his father, "Keep your eyes peeled while we're gone, and don't forget to have two of the boys stand guard to-night. I don't think the Riders will be back, but don't take any chances. Keep the house doors locked and bolted. You can't tell what deviltry they might have in mind."

"Don't you be a-worryin' about us," Routledge answered. "They ain't none of

us crippled, an' we can sling lead with th' next feller, when necessary. Just you take care of yourself—an' tell Turk an' Cotton they're to do th' same."

Blaze grasped his father's hand. "So long, until I see you again."

And with that he ran through the door and leaped to the saddle of the waiting horse held by Cotton and Turk, who were already mounted.

"We know we ain't got no chance of overtakin' the Riders," Blaze commented, picking up the reins, "but there ain't nothin' to prevent us from gettin' to town as soon as possible. Mebbe th' sooner we get there, the sooner we learn somethin'. C'mon!"

The three men swung their horses out to the well-worn trail that led to Cougar, and in three jumps were headed full speed toward town.

CHAPTER XI

At the Chuckaluck

LITTLE was said on the ride to Cougar. The moon was up now. The thought came to Blaze, as the three loped along the road, that they stood out clearly in the silvery light: good marks for anyone who might be throwing lead in their direction. However, he wasn't greatly worried. It was improbable that the Black Riders had stopped and waited along the way. Doubtless they had made all haste back to town.

It was necessary to pause twice and rest the horses. Once, at a fork in the roads, Blaze descended and looked for "sign." There were plenty of hoofprints in the dust, but whether or not they had been made by the Black Riders, there was no way to determine. He decided to push on toward Cougar.

Again they mounted and tore on through the night. All was silent save for the steady drumming of the horses' feet. It had been between ten-thirty and eleven o'clock when the three rode away from the Rafter R. It was nearing midnight when, topping a last rise of ground, they saw ahead of them a sparse cluster of scattered lights that indicated the end of the journey was near.

"There she is," Turk called across through the rush of wind. "We made pretty good time at that."

Blaze nodded, then answered. "Our broncs ain't so much on speed, but they got plenty endurance for a steady run."

Ten minutes later they were riding down the main street. Except for the saloons, dance halls and gambling houses, there were few lights to be seen now. Here and there a lamp gleamed in a window, but for the most part the respectable citizens of Cougar had retired some time before. However, the respectable citizens had little to do with the patronage of the saloons and dance halls.

Blaze and his companions pulled up at the first watering trough, that the weary, foam-flecked horses might drink. The tired beasts thrust their muzzles deep and sucked up the water in long draughts until their bellies were distended to drum tightness. Finally the men reined the reluctant ponies away from the water.

"Come on, yuh hammer-headed goat," Turk grumbled, yanking his pony into line with the other two. "Do yuh wanta drink all night? C'mon!"

They proceeded along the street at a walk. A few pedestrians were to be seen, not many. Once a drunken rider went dashing past them, swaying in the saddle emptying his six-gun at the moon as he rode.

"'Nother example of th' curse of drink," Cotton grunted, as he swerved his horse aside to avoid being run down. "That feller'll roll outa his blankets in th' mornin' wonderin' what makes his tongue taste like peppered sand-paper—"

"An' all ready to sign th' pledge not to take another drink as long as he lives," Turk chuckled. "I know! I been there. Ain't yuh ever noticed that most of th' pledges is signed in th' mornin'?"

"What I noticed most," Cotton replied, "is that you ain't never signed no pledge—an' *you* oughta!"

"Yeah, I 'spect I should," Turk returned serenely. "Since I been trailin' around with you, yuh're allus leadin' me into temptation—"

"Leadin' nothin'!" Cotton broke in. "I

allus had to run to keep up with yuh. I never yet heard of a bottle bein' around any place, that you wa'n't already there, armed with a corkscrew, when I arrived. There's two weapons you excel with, cowboy, an' they're both corkscrews. That's why I say yuh oughta sign the pledge. Yuh might keep it for a day, at that."

"T'tell th' truth," Turk confessed placidly, "I did think of signin' a promise not to drink no more, one time—"

"Not to drink no more at one time?" Cotton exclaimed. "Feller, it couldn't be done, nowhow, not by you, nor nobody else!"

"No, no, yuh don't understand," Turk explained with some impatience. "What I mean is that one time I thought of signin' th' pledge—I had th' blank slip in my pocket, all ready to be made out. I reckon I carried that paper for nigh on to five-six years—"

"An' then probably used it to write an I.O.U. for liquor," Cotton laughed.

"Nope, that wa'n't it a-tall," Turk protested earnestly. "I allus intended to sign it up proper, but every time I'd take my pencil out I'd get to thinkin' how we don't get much rain down in this part of th' country, an' supposin' th' cricks an' springs would dry up durin' a drought. In that case there wouldn't be no water to drink, and then I could use Bourbon to alleviate my thirst—"

"To what?" Cotton demanded.

"Alleviate my thirst," Turk repeated.

"Never heard of the word," Cotton declared with much emphasis, "but I'm bettin' my hoss furniture it don't mean to make your thirst no less."

Turk gave an exclamation of disgust. "Gawd! Yuh're ignorant! Well, I'm tellin' yuh, yuh fiddle-backed sheep-nurse, that's just what it does mean. To alleviate, means to make less, to relieve, to make more tolerable, more easy to bear—"

"Can't be done where yuh're concerned," Cotton broke in.

"Yes, it can too," Turk replied heatedly. "I prefer water, but whiskey is a boon to the world. Look how many doctors use it to stimulate folks."

Cotton chuckled dryly. "Cowboy, if that's the case, you should be plumb filled with vim, vinegar an' vigor all th' time!"

"Well, that's how it is, anyhow," Turk said sulkily. "Yuh wanted to know why I didn't sign th' pledge, an' I told yuh a good reason. I don't want to die of thirst."

"You won't feller, you won't," Cotton assured his pardner.

Blaze had taken no part in the argument. His eyes were busy, scanning every part of the street along which they were passing, searching for skulking figures or the careless gleam of a firearm in the shadows between buildings.

Before every saloon and dance hall waiting ponies stood at hitch-racks. Any number of them might have belonged to Black Riders, but it was, of course, impossible to determine which ones. Blaze had figured on making a round of the livery stables of the town, to determine which ponies had been taken out or brought back that evening, but now he found himself checkmated. Where horses were left on the street all night, it would be impractical to check up on the matter.

"What yuh goin' to do, Blaze," Turk asked, "if Jacklin ain't in his place when we arrive?"

Blaze shrugged his shoulders. "Hard tellin'. There ain't much we can do, until we find out where he was."

"And then?" Cotton prompted.

"Don't ask me," Blaze returned. "I've got to see how th' cards lay, before I make my play. I don't know no more about it than you do."

At that moment they drew to a halt before the Chuckaluck Palace. Blaze dismounted, loosened the cinch, and then, after throwing the reins over the hitch-rack, made his way up the steps of the big honkytonk. His two companions hesitated only long enough to spin the cylinders of their guns to see that the mechanism was in working order; then they followed close on his heels.

At this hour the Chuckaluck Palace was running full blast, as were the other saloons in town. The place swarmed with men. Three perspiring bartenders worked feverishly to assuage the thirst of the

crowd, three-deep at the bar. In the center of the room, spurred-and-booted dancers whirled their rouged, short-skirted partners in the involved steps of a waltz. Whether they kept perfect time to the blaring, screeching orchestra on the raised platform, mattered not at all. Everyone seemed to be enjoying himself immensely.

A steady roar of conversation and curses filled the Chuckaluck. The place was a veritable bedlam of sound. Through it all came the clicking of poker chips and the droning voices of the professional gamblers. The floor was littered with cigar and cigarette butts. Overhead the smoke was so thick it shrouded the rafters supporting the ceiling.

"Business is sure rushin'—as usual," Cotton commented, as the three shouldered a path through the packed horde of humanity.

Blaze nodded. "And when yuh stop to consider that Jacklin owns most of the games in town, he must be makin' a pile of money."

His eyes had been roving about the room in search of Jacklin, but the proprietor of the Chuckaluck was nowhere to be seen. "It just kinda come to me," he mentioned in an aside to Turk, "that with Jacklin coinin' money on this place and the outside games, it wouldn't be necessary for him to enter into any other schemes."

Turk nodded. "It sure seems thataway, don't it? I was thinkin' about that myself."

The three worked their way farther into the big room and at last found a place at the bar.

"Nominate your poison, gents," a red-faced bartender addressed them.

"Small beer," Blaze ordered.

"Liquefied hops for me, too," Turk added.

Cotton asked for the same. A moment later three bottles and glasses were slammed down on the bar before them, and the barkeep hurried away to answer further calls for his service.

Blaze sipped his beer slowly, meanwhile glancing over the crowd. He saw a few faces he remembered, but no one seemed particularly anxious to speak so he didn't force a renewal of old acquaintances. With Blaze's attitude, regarding the Black Riders, widely known by this time, no one, it seemed, wanted to appear friendly with him. The town of Cougar was surely gripped in a reign of terror.

Blaze wondered where Jacklin was. The drink half finished, he turned his back to the bar where he could gain a better view of the crowd. Finally he glanced up toward the balcony placed halfway up the walls. His eyes roved toward Jacklin's office. And there the search ended.

CHAPTER XII

Cotton Whips a Polecat

THROUGH the long, glass-paneled door of the office, Blaze could see Cameo Jacklin seated at his desk. The man seemed to be working over some papers. The short stub of a black cigar was clenched between his teeth. It must have been exceptionally good tobacco, because Blaze noted there was considerable length of ash attached to the stub.

Blaze's heart dropped. He had been hoping Jacklin wouldn't be in the Chuckaluck—that some proof of his absence, during the evening, would be forthcoming. But, no, the man appeared to have been sitting there for some time. The stub of cigar with its accompanying ash proved that he hadn't moved very far since the weed had been lighted. Of course, the Black Riders had had considerable start when they left the Rafter R, but, at the same time, Blaze and his two cowboys hadn't been far behind; they'd pushed the horses hard.

Blaze turned and spoke to Turk and Cotton. The cowboys' eyes shifted to the balcony; then expressions of disappointment crossed their faces.

"That's another theory shot all to pieces," Cotton pronounced ruefully.

"Kinda looks that way," Blaze admitted. Then in lower tones, "Of course, Jacklin may have had an idea we'd ride in. It's possible that he got th' stage all set to make it appear he hadn't been away from town to-night. Still, I'm admittin' that he looks like he'd been here for some time."

"How'll it be," Cotton proposed, "if I

head for th' dance floor and see can I get a dance with one of the frails? If I do, I'll put some questions to her and find out if Jacklin has been out this evening."

"Good idea," Blaze nodded his approval, "The Black Riders wouldn't be havin' girls in their crew, I'm thinkin'. Mebbe yuh can find out somethin', Turk—you drift over toward the games and see what you can learn. I'll wait here for you."

The two cowboys nodded, finished their drinks, and a moment later were lost in the crowd. Blaze turned back to the bar and ordered a second bottle of beer.

The two cowboys had scarcely departed before the places they'd vacated were taken by other men. Blaze waited until the man next to him had ordered his drink, then asked, "Say, pardner, don't Cameo Jacklin ever mingle with his guests."

The man looked at him in sudden surprise, "Must be a stranger here, ain't you?"

"Not exactly a stranger," Blaze answered. "I been away from Cougar the past few years. Jacklin's since my time."

The other nodded. He was a little, skinny man, dressed in ordinary clothing. Quite evidently a storekeeper, or something of the sort. Certainly a man of his type could have no connection with bandits. Blaze felt the fellow's word could be depended on. "Why, yes," the man continued, "Jacklin spends most of his time on the floor during business hours. I saw him down here a couple of hours ago. He must be going over his books, or something, right now."

Blaze had his answer. The affair seemed more hopeless than ever. At that moment the man's drink was served. He gulped it down, then turned to Blaze, "Do you want to meet Jacklin? I know him. Fix it up, if you want me to."

"Thanks, no," Blaze declined. "I was just wonderin', that's all. I met him today—nope, I take it back, it was yesterday. I'd forgot it was gettin' towards another day. Thanks for the offer, anyhow. If I can ever do yuh a favor, let me know. I'm Blaze Routledge."

At the mention of the name, the little man's mouth suddenly dropped open, his eyes dilated with fear. "I'm—I'm gl—glad to meet you, Mister Routledge," he stammered. "Sorry I can't stay, but I gotta get home."

And with that he dashed frantically away. Blaze smiled slightly. "One more feller that's afraid of bein' seen in my company. I don't reckon he was so glad to meet me as he said he was."

A short time later Cotton returned and squeezed against the bar at Blaze's side. "Jacklin ain't our man, I reckon," he reported. "Th' gal I was dancin' with told me he'd been on the floor up to eleven o'clock."

"It's tough luck, but I reckon we gotta look elsewhere for our clues," Blaze admitted. "I already got the bad news." He told Cotton of his conversation with the little man.

They were still laughing when Turk came back from the faro table where he had been playing. "I don't know whether the games is square, or not," he said, "but I won fifteen dollars." Then, dropping his voice, "Jacklin's been here all evening. Hasn't stirred out of the Chuckaluck since afternoon."

Blaze told him what they had learned.

"It sure looks like we're up against it," Turk commented, shaking his head. "Me, I'm disappointed." Then as an afterthought, "They's only one thing to do when your plans has flopped. C'mon, I'm buyin' a drink."

They were just about to put in an order when a burly, unshaven individual in puncher togs shoved up to the bar beside Cotton. The man had evidently been drinking heavily; his eyes were bloodshot and he lurched against the long mahogany counter.

Cotton took one look at him, then edged away a few inches. "I ain't squeamish," he announced to Blaze, "but I draw th' line on fellers that don't wash reg'lar."

"Who is he?" Blaze asked.

"Yuh got me," Cotton answered.

Turk supplied the information. "I've seen him before, around town. Name's Mohr. Ain't been in this part of the country long. Come here with a bad rep, from what I've heard."

At that moment Mohr commenced to pound loudly on the bar. "Service here," he bawled. "Have I got to wait all night to get a drink?"

A bartender hurried up, took his order, then placed a bottle and glass before the man. Disdaining the use of the glass, Mohr flung some coins on the bar and tilted the bottle. The fiery liquor flowed down his throat in long gulps. Finally he set down the bottle. "That's a man's drink, I'm shoutin'!" he announced to the room in general. "I'd like to see anybody else here drink a pint 'thout stoppin'." And, strangely enough, the liquor didn't seem to make him any drunker than he already was.

Mohr swung around on Cotton: "Think you could do it, feller?"

"Not me," Cotton answered quietly. "I know my limits."

"An 'they ain't nobody else here that can match Trigger-finger Mohr," the fellow boasted. He seized his bottle again. "Wow! I'm a curly wolf, an' it's my night to howl. Yip-yip!"

Staggering drunkenly against the bar, he managed to spill some of the liquor on Cotton's boots. The cowboy moved away a little farther.

Mohr seemed to take offense at this. "Yuh don't need to be so techy," he growled, ugly lights reddening his eyes. "I ain't a-goin' to hurt yuh."

Cotton refused to become riled. "I know yuh ain't, feller. We'll let it go at that."

He started to turn his back, when Mohr grasped him by the sleeve. "Say, you lookin' for a fight?"

"Nope," Cotton answered promptly, over his shoulder.

Mohr released his hold on Cotton's arm, but stood surveying the cowboy's back. He swayed on his heels, his face working with rage. Plainly he was spoiling for a mix-up.

Cotton had resumed his conversation with Blaze and Turk by this time. "Why didn't yuh sock him?" Turk inquired belligerently.

"Aw, what's the use," Cotton smiled. "He's just got a fightin' drunk on. They ain't no use to start trouble with a feller in that condition, if it can be avoided."

Blaze nodded approval. "Yuh're right, cowboy. We got other things to do beside mixin' in a ruckus now."

Meanwhile Mohr was muttering threats behind Cotton's back. Cotton pretended not to hear them for some minutes, but when the man reached the point where he was employing filthy epithets, the cowboy could stand it no longer. He had started to turn around, when Mohr, thinking Cotton was afraid of him, reached out and gave him a violent push.

The move jarred Cotton's sombrero over one ear. Cotton cuffed it back on his head, then turned slowly to face the trouble-maker. For a few seconds the men stared at each other. Cotton was seething with anger now, but his face was calm, his manner cool, as he drawled, "Say, polecat, how'd yuh like it if I knocked your face out from under your hat?"

Mohr's mouth dropped open in amazement. He couldn't conceive that Cotton was actually threatening him. "Who—who yuh talkin' to? Me?" he demanded.

"You're th' only polecat that I see right now, so I musta been talkin' to you," Cotton announced lazily. Men who knew Cotton always claimed he was most dangerous, when his manner was quietest.

Mohr glared at the cowboy. "I guess mebbe yuh don't know that yuh're talkin' to Trigger-finger Mohr!" he exploded.

Cotton laughed insolently in the man's face. "Your name may be Mohr, now, but if yuh don't make tracks right sudden it's goin' to be *less!*"

By this time other men in the Chuckaluck had taken notice of the quarrel. Slowly the crowd backed away, then commenced to make a ring around the two, the bar forming one side. No one spoke; all were waiting for the fight which they felt was certain to take place.

"Yuh better let him have it, Cotton," Turk stated. "We're back of yuh, if anybody else jumps in."

By this time Blaze's hands had dropped to gun butts. "I don't reckon there'll be any interference," he announced grimly.

"He wanted a scrap, cowboy. See if yuh can't accommodate him!"

Mohr could restrain his anger no longer. Bellowing with rage, he came rushing in, his long powerful arms swinging like flails.

Had any of his blows landed, the fight would have ended then and there, but they didn't. As the man drew within striking distance, Cotton slipped lightly to one side. Unable to stop his rush, Mohr stumbled past. As he went by, Cotton's left arm came flashing up—his fist landed squarely in his opponent's face.

Mohr straightened suddenly, staggered back. He tried to stop himself from falling, but his feet couldn't move fast enough. The next instant he went crashing to the floor! The blood was spurting from his nose before he landed.

Cotton didn't wait for the man to rise, but leaped forward with the swiftness of a tiger, dropped down and yanked Mohr's gun out of holster.

"Gun-whip him!" Turk yelled. "Gun-whip him, cowboy!"

But there was no need of the advice. Cotton had already rolled the struggling bully on his face. While the cowboy's left hand held Mohr to the floor, his right hand, holding the long-barreled six-shooter, rose and fell with a smooth, rhythmic movement. Mohr cursed, kicked and struggled, but couldn't break loose, as the gun descended with no little force on the seat of his pants!

Men all around were laughing and yelling now. Finally, from sheer exhaustion, Cotton ceased his labors. The perspiration was pouring from his forehead, and his grinning face was crimson from the exertion. Gaining his feet he reached down, and, seizing Mohr by the collar, yanked the man to his feet.

"Here's your gun, polecat," he stated grimly, extending the weapon at arm's length. "After th' way I've handled yuh, yuh got plenty call to use it—providin' yuh got th' nerve. If yuh ain't, put it in your holster an' keep it there!"

Mohr reached for the gun, his fingers closed about the barrel. For a moment it looked as though he might reverse it and commence rolling lead from the muzzle. However, the cold, steely look in Cotton's eyes prevented that. Mohr knew now that Cotton was the faster man on the draw, even though there'd been no gunplay.

For a full minute he stood glaring his hate at the cowboy, the blood running from his nose. Then his eyes dropped before Cotton's direct gaze. Wiping away the blood with the cuff of his sleeve, while he struggled to keep control of his feelings, Trigger-finger Mohr was, indeed, a sorry spectacle.

At last he spoke, voice trembling with rage. "This ain't finished by a long shot, feller. Yuh got your friends with yuh. I ain't. If yuh're game to wait for me, I'll be back inside fifteen minutes, then we'll settle this—final!"

"I'll be here long after you've left," Cotton drawled. "Go ahead, an' get your gang. We'll take 'em on—fists, or guns."

"It'll be guns!" Mohr snapped viciously.

Without another word he turned and was lost in the crowd. Once more the patrons of the Chuckaluck swarmed up.

Cotton turned to find some stranger at his elbow. "Yuh handled that fine, puncher. Mohr has needed takin' down for some time. Howsomever, in case yuh don't know it, I'm warnin' yuh that he's better with his gun than with his fists."

"Much obliged for th' information," Cotton said coolly. "But I ain't scared."

"That means they'll be lead flyin'," the man answered. "Me, I think I'll go."

Cotton turned back to his two friends. "Ten minutes, he said, didn't he?"

Turk nodded. "Yeah, an' he's bringin' his friends." The puncher seemed unusually pleased at the prospect.

"I'm hopin' he won't forget," Blaze commented softly. Then in tones that only his two companions could hear, "Mohr wasn't as drunk as he pretended, nor was he drinkin' all th' time that bottle was to his mouth."

"Meanin' what?" Cotton asked.

"Meanin'," Blaze explained, "that th' whole affair was cooked up to make trouble. Look to your guns, boys. They'll be comin' in a few minutes."

(*To be continued in the next issue*)

A GET-TOGETHER DEPARTMENT FOR GENERAL SERVICE TO OUR READERS

Conducted by The Storekeeper

THE BARGAIN COUNTER

If you want to exchange something you have, but don't want, for something you want that someone else has, here is the place to do it. It must be understood that ACE-HIGH *cannot be held responsible for losses sustained by our readers.*

Announcements inserted free of charge, but they must not exceed 21 words inclusive of name and address, and must be either typed or hand-printed. Nothing but BONA FIDE trades acceptable; announcements of articles for sale will be ignored. State both what you have and what you want. Study examples of announcements in this issue for the proper way to draft yours.

The United States Government prohibits the mailing of firearms capable of being concealed on the person, therefore swaps of revolvers, pistols, etc., will not be published in The Bargain Counter.

Anyone particularly interested in the subject of postage stamps may correspond with the Stamp Editor of The Bargain Counter, Chester Gatewood, 1511 Second Ave., Charleston, W. Va.

Have antique clocks, one with wood works, one 80 years old, Stereo camera, radio parts, etc. What have you? Ira Fisher, 840 No. 12th St., Noblesville, Ind.

Have colored maps about 200 years old, also autograph letter. For what? J. H. Sudbeck, 4610 No. 20th St., St. Louis, Mo.

Have 2 safety razors, flashlight, camera, detective course, Civil Service course for typewriter. What have you? William Worthey, R. 1, c/o Smith Gray, Nettleton, Miss.

Have assortment foreign stamps, French, Belgian, also foreign magazines, old magazines. Exchange for old rare books. Lists exchanged. F. L. Josephs, Box 11, Dawson, Minn.

Have typewriter, saddle bags, books. Want sleeping bag, small wood-working machines. Henry Nelson, 1545 E. Madison St., Eau Claire, Wisc.

Have scientific books and pamphlets. Your list for mine. Also have microscope and optical parts. Isidore Schwartz, 9016 Avenue "L," Brooklyn, N. Y.

It will pay you to write for my big list of all kinds of goods. Anybody interested? Write. Photos and views of cities exchanged. R. R. Slippy, 114 Craft Ave., Pittsburgh, Pa.

Have formulas, silvering mirrors, lightning battery charger, artificial marble, violet ink, etc. What have you? David B. Knight, Box 207, West Union, W. Va.

Have Seabrite bantams, white rats, guinea pigs and rabbits. What have you? A. A. Chappell, Box 622, Norphlett, Ark.

Have Indian necklace, 34x4 tires on rims, cyl. reamer and jig, for Ford, battery charger, magazines, etc. Anything in exchange. Percy Anderson, 497 Allen Ave., Muskegon, Mich.

Tear this slip off and mail it with your announcement—it entitles you to one *free* insertion in this Department. Announcements are limited to 21 words—trades only—no others considered. Announcements must be either typed or hand-printed.

Name .....

Street .....

City.....

(Void after April 20, 1928.)

Have stamp album, 100 foreign stamps. Will swap for 20 Ace-High, and other magazines. Howard Davis, 36 Wright St., Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

Want statue of fisher boy, fur coat, coon. Have Singer machine, late style, repeating rifle, etc. F. McKenna, 1408 Harvey St., Beloit, Wisc.

Writers, your name for beautiful California souvenir, 5c. postage required to cover charges. A. Soben, 327 Arcade Sta., Los Angeles, Calif.

Trade new and complete poultry course for complete radio course, super-heterodyne, parts or saxophone. F. E. Miller, 211 No. Washington St., Lockport, Ill.

Have 25 assorted Cowboy magazines. Want shoe skates in good condition, size 10 or 11. Stanley Sartinsky, 202 Curtis St., New Britain, Conn.

Have electric greaseless-doughnut machine. Want binoculars, printing press, mandolin, wrist watch, B eliminator, etc. Myron Allen, 1219 N. Wisconsin St., Racine, Wisc.

Have books, Western ballads, Frontier pictures. Want magazines. Wade Kirkland, Laroche Ave., in care of G. R. Dukes, Savannah, Ga.

Want a pinto pony, young, sound, bronco or mustang. Have lots of useful things. Also dogs, hounds, police, etc. M. Dawson, Tuckerton, N. J.

Have police dog, champion stock setter pup, ukulele. What have you? E. Camp, Tuckerton, N. J.

Have French bayonet made in 1878. Want anything in the line of cowboy goods, sombrero preferred, size 7¼. John Gorrell, 2116 E. 15th St., Tulsa, Okla.

Old U. S. territorial gold coins to trade for old U. S. or Colonial coppers. Send list. M. E. Brown, 2951 Lyeast Ave., Detroit, Mich.

Trade trap drums, portable talking machine, accordion, value $30, full dress suit, new, etc. Want anything useful in office. Dr. J. R. Roberts, Box 67, Nashville, Tenn.

Have stone tomahawk, celts, marble, moss agates, sea shells. Want Indian beadwork, perfect arrowheads, stone pipe, or? E. F. Carlson, R. 4, Box 115, Little Falls, Minn.

Have Smith typewriter, double keys. Want old coins. Send list. John Wisnew, 80 Coral St., Paterson, N. J.

Want banjo-mandolin. Have violin, guitar in case, Brownie folding camera, postcard size, ice skates, size 9. George Dumesic, 7532 15th Ave., Kenosha, Wisc.

Will trade a 7-inch brass-studded cowboy belt, value $7.50. Want banjo-uke. Buster Castle, 204 N. Miami St., Peru, Ind.

Have steel spearhead, 4-in. long, 100 other things. Want records, accordion, rifle, coins, etc. List free. Thomas Carter, Bellevue, Colo.

150 magazines, Ace-High, Cowboy Stories, and others. Want 8- or 10-power binoculars, .22 Winchester repeater, or? F. G. Ellis, 119 3rd St., Havre, Mont.

Have World War rifles, swords, bayonets, helmet, etc. Want rifles, etc. James E. Fitzgerald, 66 Hancock St., Lexington, Mass.

Have photos to exchange. What have you? W. F. Gebhardt, 331½ E. Pontiac St., Ft. Wayne, Ind.

Have Waltham 11-jewel watch and rabbits. Want saxophone, accordion, Kodak, or? Jerry R. Russell, R. D. 3, Cazenovia, N. Y.

Have books and magazines to trade for stamps. E. J. Heller, 40 Davis St., Buffalo, N. Y.

Have new guitar, piano lessons, old rifle, magical papers, and other things. Would like young police dog, or? Kenneth Bayne, Box 553, Harmarville, Pa.

Have Ace-High and other magazines. Want detective stories, also Gearhart knitter for radio. Bob Glenn, 17 E. 2nd St., St. Charles, Ill.

Want Flemish giant rabbits. Have 20 trades. Give age, weight of rabbits. Joe Morelli, Eastmont, Morgantown, W. Va.

Want Pathex projector, camping, fishing and hunting supplies. Have cornet, radio sets, parts, B eliminators, etc. James Crummy, Box 78, Etna, Pa.

Have dancing course, snare drummer's course, 75 copies of piano music, 20 player piano rolls. Make offers. E. Cable, Main St., W. Manchester, Ohio.

Have Liederman's course, dumbbells, hand-grips, wrestling books, hunting knife, traps. Will trade everything. Write me. E. W. Fairall, 22 McIntire Ave., Zanesville, Ohio.

Have 1,000 year-old raspberry plants and 10,000 garlic plants. Want anything of equal value. Frank Nelson, Box 53, Holliday, Kans.

Have 1½ H. P. marine inboard motor in first-class shape, propeller and coil. What have you? W. E. Wetterlin, Diamond Bluff, Wisc.

Want coins, curios, knives, daggers and guns. Have big list including everything. Morris Romick, 5876 Hobart St., Pittsburgh, Pa.

Trade '26 Harley-Davidson motorcycle for late Ford roadster or? Wilbur Perkins, 973 Somerset Ave., Indianapolis, Ind.

Several articles to trade for rough Montana agates, Iceland spar and other minerals. The Gem Shop, Box A 37, Wolf Creek, Mont.

2 or 3 years (incomplete) files N. Y. World, new Students' Reference work. Want American Mercury magazines. H. Blomberg, 1423 Oak St., Los Angeles, Calif.

Will trade 5 paper-covered books, good condition, for one cloth-bound book. Several hundred to trade. Vernon Cannon, 284 Magnolia St., Spartanburg, S. C.

Have mounted moose head. Sacrifice for shotgun, motor, microscope, Indian relics. Also have traps, rifle, etc. M. H. Munhall, R. F. D. 5, Decatur, Ill.

Have double 12-ga. hammer shotgun, full choke, good shooting condition. Want Krag or other rifle. Albert Ponto, Hillsboro, No. Dak.

Have used stamps, cigar bands, and two correspondence courses. What have you? Lynn Liedner, 985 Humboldt Blvd., Milwaukee, Wisc.

Want Waltham vanguard watch, cluster diamond ring. Have cowboy gun, 40 acres, checkwriters, necklaces. Box 733, Valley City, N. Dak.

Trade Hawkins' electrical guides, 10 vols., tattoo-removing formulas, power plant engineering, magazines, for string instruments, or? R. B. Tidd, 84 W. Main St., Alliance, Ohio.

Many books and hundreds of magazines to trade for clothbound books, radio parts, or? H. I. Sanders, 1606 Bass Ave., Kenilworth, D. C.

Want second-hand typewriter in good condition. Have movie machine, bead rings, violin. Joseph Maher, 451 Stuyvesant St., Lyndhurst, N. J.

Have Ashcroft paper gauge, .001 to .110, new, 2-A folding camera, boxing gloves, slightly used. Want new typewriter. David Stern, 511 Rockaway Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.

Want tenor banjo, and I will offer a good square trade. Have anything you want? Send for my list. Stanley Jensen, 1412 Thorndale Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Want Indian relics, curios, beadwork, eagle tails, grizzly bear claws, old books on Indians, daggers, etc. Anything in exchange. A. G. Heath, 444 E. 42nd St., Chicago, Ill.

Will exchange books, magazines, etc., for any bird books that I can use. Want some old-time editions on birds. Johnson A. Neff, Marionville, Mo.

Want tent 15x20 with 7-foot walls. Have complete movie road show, films, costumes, magic Buddah, cornet, etc. Heath, 925 E. Maryland St., Evansville, Ind.

Will trade a vapor cold formula, $5, stock will make $30. What have you to trade? Otto Baker, 706 W. Green St., Smethport, Pa.

Have Remington .25-20. Want Remington model No. 14. I. W. Randall, 155 W. Main St., Rochester, N. Y.

Coin book tells the value of old money. Will exchange for tobacco coupons (12 certificates). Walter White, 190 Nagle Ave., New York City.

Want chemistry set, telephone directories, novelties, or? Have ice skates, .22 rifle, 100 books, etc. Ernest Higgins, West Side Court, Lexington, Va.

Want baritone horn, movie films, or what have you? Have 60 disc records, loud speaker, ladies toilet set, new. A. D. Campbell, Box 174, Kings Park, Long Island, N. Y.

Copies of National Sportsman and Billboard, also others for song books or old novels. Charles Welton, R. F. D. 5, Austin Rd., Waterbury, Conn.

Want single-barrel .410 shotgun. Have single barrel 12-ga. shotgun. G. E. Browne, 600 Manning St., Kinston, N. C.

Want novelty musical instruments, cowboy goods, postcard views, tattoo outfit, tramp and clown outfits. F. L. Hargraves, 950 Cranston St., Arlington, R. I.

Books, guns, Ford parts, dumbbell, old coins, trap, knives, camera. Will swap for correspondence. R. L. Catt, c/o Dickerhoff, R. R. 2, Silver Lake, Ind.

For trade, a mounted wolf head for German police pup. Must be thoroughbred. Forest Long, Lookeba, Okla.

Want Graflex, banjo, or Kodak. What do you want? Send for my list. J. H. Winner, 4323 Fleming St., Roxboro in Philadelphia, Pa.

Precancels, all different, and cat, for 300 United Certificates and 1,000 certificates. M. Keyes, 52 Capitol Ave., Hartford, Conn.

Your monogram in black and gold traded for each $1.00 value. Write, enclosing stamp for trade confirmation before sending. Walter Karlton Kral, Vermillion, Kans.

Have tools, maps, books, chemicals, courses, rifles, etc. Want cameras, musical instruments, or what? E. Queeney, 31 Highland Terrace, Gloversville, N. Y.

Have Alexander Hamilton business course. Want stamp collection, or what have you? William R. Bowie, Vanceboro, Me.

Have two bandoliers of machine gun cartridges. What am I offered? E. W. Martin, Box 22, Fairchild, Wisc.

Want livestock. Will trade many articles of value for dogs, rabbits, chickens, cats, pigeons, raccoons, mink, etc. C. A. Frickman, R. F. D. 1, Marcellus, N. Y.

New 83,000 word dictionary, instruction course in signs and showcards. Want small developing outfit, or? D. McNeal, 153 Detroit Ave., Columbus, Ohio.

Have books and 1911 German piece. Want African and South American stamps, F. S. Egan, 511 1st Ave., Valley City, N. Dak.

Want curios for den, such as swords, etc. Have Indian relics, magazines, sword. Edmund Budde, Jr., 4313 Katonah Ave., Bronx, N. Y.

Have 9-mm. rifle and other articles. Want superheterodyne Radiola, 21-jewel Howard railroad watch. Milo Howard, Box 32, Houlton, Me.

Have Radio News, 1920-26, 10 radio stories. Will do printing. Want 6 350-volt dynamotor, 28x3 motorcycle tire and tube. R. C. Briggs, 53 Tremont St., Athol, Mass.

Vacant lots in county seat towns to trade for improved lot, diamonds, or land, or? O. R. Denton, R. 2, Durant, Okla.

Want novels, fountain pen, or what have you? Have McFadden's 10-cable exerciser with course. H. C. Trampler, 528 Bergenline Ave., Union City, N. J.

Have cowboy poems. Will swap "A Bar 4 Bluffer" for your name and a stamp. Stone, Box 785, Worcester, Mass.

Have $2.50 ladies' new silver chain, crystal pendant, latest style. Trade for most anything. Joseph Jurn 39 Lyman St., Providence, R. I.

Have double-barrel shotgun, single shot .22 calibre Stevens rifle, binoculars, camera, etc. Want Kodak, Graflex, or? H. Winner, 4323 Fleming St., Roxboro in Philadelphia, Pa.

Have ranger bicycle in good condition, 55 Western story magazines. Want good saxophone. Robert Gramling, Merigold, Miss.

Have I. C. S. salesmanship course. Want magic books, magazines, blue prints, or what have you? N. T. Sheward, 81 E. San Fernando St., San Jose, Calif.

Have 200 "Health and Strength" magazines and other physical culture books. Want "Muscle Builder," ring and physical culture books. Jim McCay, 26 Elmwood St., Londonderry, N. Ireland.

Want guitar course, typewriter. Have mandolin, relics, pocketscope, courses, and lots of other things. John Bannon, 412 Seneca St., Oil City, Pa.

Have radio parts, gas mask, U. S. half dime of 1872, 18K. white gold diamond ring. My list for yours. R. Mitchell, 2 Hancock Terrace, Everett, Mass.

52 foreign stamps for every arrowhead or good foreign coin sent me. Send list of what you want and have to trade. M. E. Sponholz, 1221 Lincoln Ave., Milwaukee, Wisc.

Have 1927 Ford parts, stamps and magazines. Want radio, tennis rackets, golf clubs, skates, or? E. Elixman, 411 No. Davidson St., Indianapolis, Ind.

Have 184 copies of magazines, 1922 to 1928. What have you? George Heibel, 2144 S. Woodstock, Philadelphia, Pa.

Want old documents, letters, books, autographs, stamps, old U. S. relics, etc. Have musical instruments, field-glasses, or? J. Settel, 24 Crosby Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.

Build up your stamp collection by exchanging with me. Thousands ready for inspection. Write me. L. V. Leach, Beaver Dams, N. Y.

Have to trade radio, mechanic books, boxing gloves, soccer ball. What have you? Dan Gray, Dayhoit, Ky.

Want Oregon homestead location or relinquishment. Have car, tools, or what do you want? G. B. Farnsworth, Box 185, Vacaville, Calif.

Have two loud speakers, radio parts, tattoo outfit, knitter, films, tattoo remover, accordion, etc. Albert Eyre, 1036 No. 25th St., Camden, N. J.

Have 12-ga. Ithaca hammerless, new condition. Want .35 Remington, .30-06 Remington or Winchester, or what? A. B. Welton, Tawatinaw, Alta, Canada.

Have 100 novels, all kinds, 100 Western magazines, camp equipment, etc. Want plate barbell with course. Write. La Grande Martin, Chester, Va.

Have .38-55 rifle. Have hammerless shotgun, radio tubes. Want watch or accordion. W. Corey, Houlton, Me.

Have about $4 worth of old magazines. Trade for Ford accessories, or what have you? G. W. Vogt, 271 Jackson St., Hempstead, N. Y.

Want air compressor, radio, electric motor. Have old clock, wagon, furniture, typewriter, fine Western quarter-section land. W. A. Burch, Garden City, Kans.

Bronze casting form to make metal whistles, to trade for typewriter. R. A. Lorant, R. F. D. 1, Arnold, Pa.

Have men's new silver watch chains. Want radio, tubes, phones, units, or what? Joseph Juan, 39 Lyman St., Providence, R. I.

Want parrot. Have everything. What do you want? Send for my list. Jack E. Cole, Box 108, Bennington, Vt.

Want to swap books, magazines, pictures, letters. What have you? Waid Davenport, Maysville, Okla.

Have tourist umbrella tent, new, 12-ga. shotgun, Kampcook stove, 2 casting rods. Want outboard motor. J. O. Higgins, 119 N. Harrison St., Shelbyville, Ind.

Have portable moving-picture machine, like new, full lighting equipment, value $350. Want new type phonograph, or? Kermit Sansing, Clarksville, Ark.

Trade $35 cornet, casting outfit, opera glasses. Want radio, Hawkins' guides, linemen's tools. Reuben N. Torgerson, Box 67, Tagus, N. Dak.

Have lots of Kodak pictures. Have you any? Let's swap. Inquiries answered. H. C. Bulloch, 137 Prince Edward Pl., Jackson, Tenn.

Have 6½ yds. remnant fine carpeting, 50 Ace-High and other Western magazines. What have you? J. L. Wilson, Hotel Bankhead, Birmingham, Ala.

Have useful articles to trade for printing, shotguns, rifles and war relics. Horace Coskrey, R. F. D. 5, Troy, Ala.

Have magazines, International Lumber course, field-glasses, stamps. Want radio, or what have you? L. J. White, 735 Anneslie Rd., Baltimore, Md.

Want to trade stamps, basis Scott. Have stamps, radio parts. Ten foreign stamps for every U. S. stamp before 1903 sent me. Finlay Howard, Elm St., Harlan, Ky.

Have 3-section 4-power telescope, box camera, takes 2½ x 4¼ pictures, games, etc. Want small printing press, or what? Clarence Russell, 917 Muirfield Ave., Waukeegan, Ill.

Have punching bag, white rats, typewriter. Want guinea pigs or any kind of pets. What do you want? Louie Henderson, 211 Snow St., Oxford, Ala.

Have ferrets, Ford sedan, watches, bookcase cabinet, etc. Want guns, relics, dogs, furs, etc. J. Dalton, Wellsville, Ohio.

Have 4-tube radio, complete, Trebble accordion, banjo-uke, camera. Want high-class fishing rods, reels, etc. Harold Moulton, 119 Audubon Ave., N. Y. City.

Have good 12-ga. double-barrel shotgun. Want good pistol. S. H. Nickels, Box 253, Carrizozo, New Mexico.

Want to swap government postal cards and friendly letters with foreign readers. J. B. Saunders, 614 E. Franklin Ave., Gastonia, N. C.

Have Milo barbells and musical saw outfit. Want hunting dogs or guns. Henry E. Kremer, Schuylkill Haven, Pa.

Want Kodak or Kodak accessories. Have tenor banjo, mandolin, both good instruments, also other things. D. A. Fults, Jr., Western Union, Joplin, Mo.

Have Western and boys' magazines, radio parts, 1,500 stamps, dollar camera. Want more magazines or things necessary in college. D. G. Fox, Box 8, Elkton, Mich.

For each perfect gem point sent me I will send five story magazines. H. Sloan, Belle Fourche, S. Dak.

Trade Marlin model 27, .32-20 smokeless, steel barrel, good as new. Want .38-40 Winchester rifle or carbine. Must be good. D. S. Cain, 320 W. Walnut St., Barnesville, Ohio.

Have two watches, camera, flashlight, books. Want complete Western outfit. Eino Stenroos, Box 7, Hurley, Wisc.

Have .22 Winchester repeater, new auto tent, 12-ga. shotgun, Brownie camera, etc. Want Indian motorcycle. Charles Totilas, 611 E. Trumbull Ave., Albuquerque, N. M.

Have bull pup 6 months old, Victrola records. Will consider anything. What have you? William Cowan, Box 963, Kiefer, Okla.

Have 15c. S. & S. novels and profit-sharing coupons. Will exchange these for foreign or U. S. stamps. Francis Lewis, 83 Charter Oak St., So. Manchester, Conn.

Have Indian baskets, curios, fox, wild cat hides, oil paintings. Want steel Hawaiian guitar, talking parrot, leather violin case. Viola Anderson, Coarsegold, Calif.

Have model L Atwater Kent loud speaker, value $14. Want Ford baloon tire, or equal swap. Stanley Chrapcyriski, Mt. Pleasant, Pa.

Want motion-picture film, standard size. Have chemistry set and all kinds of postcards, or? Jack Kossover, 172 Varet St., Brooklyn, N. Y.

Have cylinder phonograph records, courses, information on hypotism, books of all kinds. Interested in musical instruments and records. R. Neale, 1 Williams Pl., Everett, Mass.

Have beauty culture correspondence course. Want musical instrument, or? B. Winn, 3402 Gaston Ave., Dallas, Texas.

Have .41-cal. high-power Waffenfabrik Swiss rifle. Want 12- or 16-ga. pump or Victrola. W. M. Hooks, Cushing, Texas.

Will trade 150 foreign stamps for the names and addresses of 300 people in your city. K. Wendland, 1207 So. 17th St., Sheboygan, Wisc.

Have dictograph complete, also earphones and unit, for postage stamps. George Lynn, 2617 No. 18th St., Philadelphia, Pa.

Have 6-volt generator and starter to trade for cartooning course. Floyd H. Zirbel, 1181 Gladstone Ave., Portland, Ore.

Want ¼ K. W. transformer, old radio and song books. Have storage battery, police badge and most anything. Henry Priebe, Box 115, Kent, Ohio.

Best formula for silvering mirrors, no solution boiling; antique celestine, over 75 years old, etc. Will exchange for radio parts, give parts, or? J. E. DuMont, Exeter, Lowell, Mass.

Have 60 magazines, Ace-High, Cowboy Stories, etc. Want cowboy boots, size 7½ or 8 in good condition. Elmer Johnson, 1206 Mills St., Kalamazoo, Mich.

Have fresh water pearls, agate and flint arrowheads, Sioux beadwork, old books. What have you? Clarence E. Knudson, 221 So. 2nd St., Sterling, Colo.

Want radio parts, repairs, old and broken sets, anything to build sets. What have you? What do you want? Sidney Mayle, Fisher's Lane, Zanesville, Ohio.

Have anything to trade. What have you? William Townley, 2679 Montana Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio.

All kinds of prehistoric Indian relics to trade for good guns. Send your list. Vern Martin, 1137 Lincoln Ave., Steubenville, Ohio.

Want recipes from everywhere. Have recipes, magazines, etc. Mrs. Helen Powell, 122 Church St., Washington, Pa.

Have steamer trunk, suitable for missionary. Want Book of Knowledge complete. Birger Nelson, 347 So. 3rd E., Salt Lake City, Utah.

Have Scott's 1905 stamp catalogue, antique bottle, 75 golf balls. Want U. S. coins. Anthony Krajewski, 14 William St., Westfield, Mass.

Have rare books, "Old Fighting Days," by Punshon, good condition. Want Rhode Island Red rooster and hen. H. Mitchell, 1216 Mary St., Evansville, Ind.

Want printing press, type, multigraph, mimeograph, typewriter. Have auto, motorcycle and other articles. List. L. B. Hall, 9304 Amesbury Ave., Cleveland, O.

Will trade fancy pigeons for shotgun A or B. Rudolph Lipka, 2248 Crosat St., La Salle, Ill.

Have .44 Winchester repeater, old coins and stamps. Want 16- or 20-ga. repeater. Write. John Ferry, 242 Line St., Sunbury, Pa.

Have Taxidermy bird course, for guns and rifles. C. J. Schnick, 427 17th St., Rock Island, Ill.

Will trade .22 Savage repeater or .22 Remington repeater for anything of like value. No junk considered. Send your list. Andrew Anderson, Callender, Iowa.

Have flower plants and bulbs, seeds and a variety of articles. Want printing press, records, magazines, etc. Write for list. F. J. Wells, Lodoga, Calif.

Want 1913 V nickels (no Buffalo). Will exchange 3 lbs. Oregon prunes. Nettie Graham, Box 209, Salem, Ore.

Have stories of famous gunfights of the West and cowboys' primer. What's offered? Write. Adam Lavinsky, 76 Ward St., Worcester, Mass.

Want pet. Dog preferred. Have four large books on the history of Masonic lodge. Write for list. Mrs. R. Griffith, 300 So. Fremont Ave., Alhambra, Calif.

Have coonskin coat, outboard motor, choice police dog, horse-hide robe. Want ruby, cameo, or offers. Leo Hernepont, St. Paul Park, Minn.

Have nice Airedale dog. Would like to trade for shotgun, 12-ga., any make. W. B. Kinser, Norton, Va.

Have Virginia fairy or lucky stones, books, oil painting, evergreens. What have you? Fred Hayford, R. 2, Bassett, Va.

Have guitar, banjo-uke, rod, reel, plug, magazines, Hawkins' electric guides, 10 vols., etc. Want beagles or pair rabbit hounds. W. F. Moore, Newton, N. C.

Have rabbit dog, bird dog, mandolin, guitar, jewelry, new crystal set. Want broken coon dog, tent, or? Frank Fisher, 507 Oliver St., Covington, Ky.

Have electrical course in International Correspondence School. What have you? Fred A. Hortop, 244 N. Rosemont Ave., Los Angeles, Calif.

Have .40-65 Winchester rifle. Want accordion, or? What have you? Theodore Norris, Box 184, Fruitland, Idaho.

Have new bear-foot style snowshoes. Want shotgun or rifle. R. Compton, 222 W. William St., Corning, N. Y.

Have old, rare books, stamps, Confederate money, army belts, army canteens, for books on history. Clarence Griffin, Spindale, N. C.

Exchange month's treatment nervous disease for second-hand washing machine or small electric motor. Dr. Cooley (Nerve Specialist), 215 Security Bldg., Tulsa, Okla.

Have revolving postcard racks, stamps, magazines, etc. Want coins, Indian relics, binoculars, watch, or? E. Cable, Main St., West Manchester, Ohio.

Gold coins, U. S. and California, to trade for U. S. and Colonial coppers. Send list. M. E. Brown, 2951 Lycast Ave., Detroit, Mich.

High-powered radio complete with tubes, batteries and speaker, walnut cabinet 26x8. Want chickens, or? Irvin A. Pittman, 162 S. Broadway, Pittman, N. J.

Have books, magazines, athletic equipment, etc. Want books (send list), .22 repeater, or? E. F. Steiner, 509 Segur Ave., Toledo, Ohio.

Have Kodak, .22 calibre rifle, two pens, four boxing mitts, gold watch case, etc. Want old coins, bills, medals, or? V. H. Anderson, R. 4, Box 29, Cokato, Minn.

Have 1-tube Westinghouse radio complete. What have you? J. Merrick, Jr., Box 284, Bismarck, N. Dak.

Have all kinds of formulas and 190 S. & H. stamps. Will trade for anything. Swap lists? Joseph P. Izzo, 21 Loveday St., Providence, R. I.

Want old U. S. coins. Have most anything. Want 3-tube radio or parts. Have 20 Ace-High magazines. Will trade local paper for yours. W. V. Strickland, 16 Mechanic St., Freehold, N. J.

Have ranger bicycle, 12 traps, new crokinole board, musket gun, old-fashioned rifle. Want 12-ga. pump gun, etc. Frank Bradley, Cooperstown, N. Y.

Cowboy's silver-mounted leather vest, rattlesnake pockets, leather trimmed, like new. Make offer. H. E. Stone, Box 785, Worcester, Mass.

Trade old coins, medals, badges, cigar bands and tokens. Want Lincolns. Philip H. Sheridan, 44 May St., Worcester, Mass.

Trade two fine old .45 rifles, engraved sword, and new racing bike. Want single motorcycle or something useful. Vincent Castord, 355 York St., Jersey City, N. J.

Want short wave coils, prefer Aero coils, also 202- or 210-tubes. Will print QSL cards or all kinds of printing. R. O. Briggs, 53 Tremont St., Athol, Mass.

Have paid-up scholarship, any I. C. S. course. Want latest model of any nearly-new typewriter. Wallace Brown R. 4, Yates Center, Kans.

Have Berna split second stop watch, engineer's slide rule, reading-glass, tortoise-shell frame. Want auto repair books, or? J. Hedsturm, 1466 Harvard St., N. W., Washington, D. C.

Wireless transmitter. Trade for 12x14 or larger printing press and type, 1-tube radio for typewriter. My list for yours. W. C. Hickman, 3 Somerset Rd., New Lexington, Ohio.

Have coonskin coat, good condition. Make offer. Leo Hernepont, St. Paul Park, Minn.

Will trade trio of wild mallard decoys for Angoran or Persian cat or kitten. Must be pedigreed, either sex. Charley Whitlow, 1211 S. Madison St., Gillespie, Ill.

Want song poems, cluster diamond ring. Have watches, check writers, land, pears, or? L. B. H., 1017 W. 3rd St., Valley City, N. Dak.

Have poultry, auto parts, clothing, swine, shoes. Want anything. Send for list of useful articles. H. C. Coskrey, R. 5, Troy, Ala.

Have old books, arrowheads, formula for recleaning motor oil. Want hens, typewriter, or? Make offer. W. M. Taylor, R. F. D. 7, Greenville, S. C.

Town lots in West Texas and New Mexico to trade for land, improved lots, or diamonds. O. R. Denton, R. 2, Durant, Okla.

Stamps, 1,000, all different, for 200 United Certificates; 2,000, all different, for 550 United Certificates. W. Keyes, 52 Capitol Ave., Hartford, Conn.

Have portable phonograph. Want "A" battery charger, 5 amperes or more, or what have you? Arnold Pranschke, 110 E. Walnut St., Denison, Iowa.

Have railway correspondence course, 2-burner Perfection oil stove, registered French bull pups. Want typewriter, or? C. E. Gaither, 1226 No. Lorraine, Wichita, Kans.

Have loud speaker unit which fits horn or phonograph. Want Baldwin headset. F. Kirkpatrick, Lost Hills, Calif.

Have recipe that "will sure grow new hair," to trade for 50 old U. S. and foreign stamps. F. H. Glascott, Perry St. Hotel, Fostoria, Ohio.

Have Stevens target rifle with scope. Want Gibbs two-trigger 9½ Oneida jump No. 1 or No. 2 chocker traps. E. N. Myers, R. F. D. 1, Baldwinsville, N. Y.

Swap squirrel skins, 30 classics, 1-minute camera, .22 rifle, shoe skates, sailor's uniform. Want good .22 rifle and old coins. L. Racicot, 21 Ripley Pl., Norwich, Conn.

Have new novels, drafting books, disk records and I. C. S. handbook for plumbers. J. S. Smith, 2318 Ave. H, Ensley, Ala.

5- and 8-tube radio, shotguns, 5 x 7 camera, 3-stage amplifier, aviation magazines. Want saxophone, binoculars, etc. R. O. Miller, 104 W. 17th St., Anderson, Ind.

Have 9 pits bull puppies, checked joint rabbits. Want Muscova and Indian runner ducks. A. A. Chappell, Box 622, Norphlett, Ark.

Will trade fine foreign stamps for U. S. Norse Americans, Omahas, Pilgrim, Tercens, basis Scott's catalogue. V. P. B. Hofmann, 548 Eaton St., Hammond, Ind.

Have baseball mask, golf balls and book. Want books of World War, telescope, or? H. Goldsmith, 2823 Valentine Ave., New York City.

Have incubators, brooders, and egg-bred Farris-strain Leghorn pullets. Want Black Monorcas or Jersey Giant hens. Walter Becker, Alliance, Nebr.

30 suits white duck, fit man 5 ft. 8 ins., 145 pounds, German relics, old coins. What have you? Fred Hiller, 9 Maple Ave., Foxboro, Mass.

Have 75 Resurrection or Rose of Jericho plants, or binoculars for good folding Kodak, National Salesmen's training course, or? L. B. Thomas, 204 Washington Ave., Belleville, N. J.

Have Indian copper bracelet, arrow, Kodak, 4x5. Want old war pistols, guns and relics, or anything. C. Williams, Box 205, Kilbourn, Wisc.

Will trade canaries with other canary breeders. Have Rollers from Seifert strain. J. C. Flygare, 617 Baldridge Ave., N. Braddock, Pa.

Want old U. S. and foreign stamps. What do you want? H. L. Carr, 43 Sheffield Ave., Englewood, N. J.

Have Liederman course, boxing gloves, shoe skates, 3-tube radio, jiu-jitsu book, for? John Alexander, 10 Boston Rd., Marlboro, Mass.

Field-glass, telescope, war club head, 100 arrow points. Want old U. S. coins, old guns, relics, or offers. Lester Wagner, 1117 So. 3rd St., Ironton, Ohio.

Have vest-pocket autographic Kodak, bugle, skis, 3-cell flashlight, etc. Want outboard motor, typewriter, rifles. Stanley Senkus, 21 Edward St., Waterbury, Conn.

Have Savage N. R. A. Want Winchester carbine, .30-30 or Remington pump .25. Henry Harrison, 36 Fales St., Worcester, Mass.

Will trade Western story or Ace-High magazines for Nicholas Carter books. George Kaiser, Box 602, Webster, S. Dak.

Player piano; Fox double-barrel, new; 17-jewel Elgin, new; folding Brownie No. 2. Want good auto or late 6- or 7-tube radio. Albert Cox, 2213 Queen St., Middletown, Ohio.

Ford speed and power camshaft, .22 Stevens, .22 Winchester special, new. Want repeating shotgun, typewriter, or? Homer Dodge, Blackstone, Ill.

Have formulas, recipes and trade secrets of any kind. What have you to trade? William Mullins, Seelyville, Ind.

Have magazines of all kinds to trade for Ace-High or others. Howard Farley, Dayholt, Ky.

Have C-melody gold saxophone, double bass violin, twin motorcycle engine, film, band instruments. Want Bowers No. 6 or later model head. J. Foote, New Haven, Ky.

Have 5 ft. 6 in. rod and reel. Want band horn. H. Havens, Marcellus Rd., Mineola, N. Y.

Have binoculars, field-glasses, children's raincoats. Will trade for most anything. Leon Achuff, 257 Water St., Paterson, N. J.

Have guitar, jewels, fountain pens. Want police or collie pups, or what have you? Bessie Ferrell, Box 45, Tamcliff, W. Va.

Have 4 new restaurant booths and benches. Trade for new pump gun or anything of value. Otto J. Peck, Monticello, Ill.

Have bobcat skins, Hawkeye camera, cowboy round-up snapshots. Want World War U. S. trench helmet, or what have you? Frank Makoski, 1442 Elk Grove Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Want old guns, motion-picture film. Have boxing gloves, hunting knife, etc. All letters answered. Harry Runyon, Jr., R. F. D. 6, New Brunswick, N. J.

Have 5-tube neutrodyne in mahogany cabinet. Want portable set in case. F. Kirkpatrick, Lost Hills, Calif.

Have hip-boots, Lincoln's benefators sizes 8-9. Want 75-lb. pull bow, rifles, guns. Arthur Hagen, Box 111, Northwood, N. Dak.

Have 75 Ace-High and other magazines. Want rifles, drum, loud speaker, or? Ray Mickey, 227 Central St., Elkins, W. Va.

Want old-time quilts, china, glass, old furniture, small wooden boxes, especially inlaid ones. Will trade anything. L. H. Badart, 13 W. Franklin St., Baltimore, Md.

Have violin, bow and case. Want aviation course and automobile books, or? R. G. Wilborn, Box 344, Mineral Wells, Texas.

Want swords, bayonets, daggers, old pistols, spearheads, tomahawk, Indian pipe. Have binoculars, field-glasses, boxing gloves, etc. Martin Hetzel, 4145 W. 21st Pl., Chicago, Ill.

Want double-rigged stock saddle over 13-inch tree. Have snow shoes, 4 straight razors, 12-ga. double-barrel shotgun, etc. W. F. Kodrick, R. D. 3, Cooperstown, N. Y.

Want to exchange postcard views with anybody. Send cards in envelope. Gustave Stiegler, Jr., 224 Crescent Ave., Wyoming, Ohio.

Will exchange U. S. precancelled and revenue stamps, or will give in exchange old guns, swords, books, magazines, or? Edward Dvorak, 4874 E. 106th St., Cleveland, Ohio.

Burns' wrestling, De Forest boxing and Atlas physical culture courses for cartooning courses. George Hess, Jr., 429 Quincy St., Green Bay, Wisc.

Will swap B. S. A. track wheel for Johnson light outboard motor with anyone around New York. Frank C. Osborn, Jr., 766 Higney Pl., Bronx, New York.

Almost new 15-vol. adventure and 11-vol. mystery libraries. Want good radio, complete. Paul Arendt, 37 Greene St., Buffalo, N. Y.

Want MacMahon fighting bag, copy of "Key to Might and Muscle," and Liederman books, "Endurance." Clyde Lavender, 913 So. Ledford St., Harrisburg, Ill.

WANTED—INFORMATION

Are you looking for any one who has been missing for a long time? If so, write down, either typed or hand-printed, all particulars and we will publish your notice in ACE-HIGH. *Notices may be listed anonymously if you so desire. Before taking action concerning any answers received, be sure to lay the matter before us. We assume no responsibility for this department. Do not send any money to strangers. Notify us at once when you have found your man.*

WHITE, LUCILLE—Formerly of Erick, Okla., in 1924. About 18 years old. A friend would like to get in touch with you. Information of her present whereabouts will be appreciated. Write. "Joe," c/o Ace-High Magazine.

McGREGOR, ALEXANDER PORTERFIELD — Last heard of in Fort Brown, Brownsville, Texas, about 1916, and at one time he lived in Colorado. Kindly communicate with brother William, 10 Norton St., Liverpool, England.

CARMELLO, JENNY—Formerly of Providence, R. I., now believed to be in Paterson, N. J. Jenny, will you please write to your old friend, B. B., care of Ace-High Magazine.

CARR, JOSEPH—Last heard of at Purvis Street, Indiana. Mr. Carr may be dead, but his daughter, who lived with him was Miss Priscilla Carr, now Mrs. Walter Percival. They were known to have two ranches in Indiana. Any information will be appreciated. Philip Weiss, 48 E. 104th St., New York City.

FOSTER, IDA—Gave birth to a baby girl in a private children's home, May 5, 1909, at Des Moines, Iowa. Baby adopted same day and it is understood mother never saw her. Daughter is now married and would like to hear from anyone knowing the whereabouts of her mother or any of her mother's family. Write B. M. S., care of Ace-High Magazine.

ABEL, WILLIAM or STANTON—Last heard of in Jersey City, N. J., May, 1915. Believed to have gone out West. Anyone knowing him or his present whereabouts please notify his sister, Mrs. Joseph Daley, 1747 Dean St., Brooklyn, N. Y.

Any information of the Cain generation will be appreciated by a lonesome 22-year-old broken-hearted boy. J. T. Cain, Madisonville, Ky.

BORING, J. C.—6 ft. tall, brown eyes, weight 175 lbs. Last heard from in New Orleans, La. Anyone knowing present whereabouts please notify Masto Sonchez, General Delivery, Greenville, Miss.

MILLS, MILDRED—Known as "Mickey." Her home is in Decatur, Ill., but she is believed to be in Colorado with her parents and brother Dave. Mickey, write to Frank of the U. S. S. "Mississippi." Any information concerning her whereabouts will be appreciated by Frank, c/o Ace-High Magazine.

DAVIS, JOHN JUDSON—Moved from 59th St. and Hermitage Ave. 6 years ago. Please communicate at once with sister Sal, as we are to have trouble about Dick. You can come to me or write to me, please, as it is very urgent. Harriet E. Davis, 3216 Fulton Blvd., Chicago, Ill.

CHAMBERLAIN, ED. or E. F.—Age 44 years, blue eyes, light brown hair, light complexion, has had smallpox, about 5 ft. 8 in., weight about 160 lbs., well built. Was a carpenter by trade. Disappeared on July 5, 1925. Any information will be appreciated by his family. R. Chamberlain, 6018 89th St., S. E., Portland, Ore.

DAVIS, EDGAR L.—Left home 34 years ago, and has not been heard from since. Any information will be gladly received by his son, Menso K. Davis, R. R. 3, Shelbyville, Ill.

CODY, ROSEMARY—Lived in Seattle and in Freemont, around 1917-18-19. Was known as "Babe." She is about 15 or 16 years old. Any information concerning her present whereabouts will be thankfully received by Glenn Hardy, R. 10, Box 385, Seattle, Wash.

SCHONARD, VINITA—15 or 16 years old, 5 ft. 5 in. tall, blond hair, blue eyes. Last heard of in Chicago. Please write to your cousin. Have you forgotten me? Hosea Schoffstall, 220 Eagle St., Terre Haute, Ind.

MULEY—Write to your mother, so we can all read it. All is well. Got your last from Aberdeen. Will give the particulars when you write. Dad.

MURCHISON, W. R.—I would like very much to get in touch with you. Robert Hildreth, 30 Edgewood St., Springfield, Mass.

AROUND THE STOVE

READ THIS, COWHANDS

Dear Editor:

I have been a reader of ACE-HIGH MAGAZINE for quite a while, and I think it is a wonderful book. Not many girls like Western books, but I sure do like them and I think ACE-HIGH has some wonderful Western stories in it. I am sending you an ad to put in the "General Delivery" for me, if you will. I like Mr. William C. MacDonald's stories best of all. Of course I like all the rest of the writers' stories, but I like his best. I have some friends who read ACE-HIGH, and they also like his stories best. Please put the enclosed ad in "General Delivery" for me. I will close, wishing you much success in the future. I remain,

A constant reader,
MISS LORENE CARRIER.
711 *Bradburn St., Paragould, Ark.*

P. S.—I would like to correspond with cowhands from Arizona, Wyoming, Nevada, Montana, and all other Western states. I will answer letters from any state or country. Please write, everybody.

READS "THE COUNTRY STORE" FIRST

Dear Editor:

I have been reading your magazine for some time, but I have never taken time to write to you telling how much I appreciate it. The stories in ACE-HIGH are all good, and may they continue to be so. H. Bedford Jones' story, "Figure Four Clark," was fine, and I stuck with it until I finished it. The same happens when I hit stories by such writers as Ripton Croy, J. Edward Leithead, Grant Taylor, Albert William Stone, W. D. Hoffman, William Colt MacDonald and Charles W. Tyler. The "Country Store" Department is also a great attraction of your mag. It is the first thing I turn to when I get a new copy of ACE-HIGH. So, with the hope that your writers continue, as they have in the past, to give us the best of reading, I will stop this letter, wishing you and all writers who contribute to ACE-HIGH a Happy New Year.

Yours truly,
617 *Baldridge Ave., N. Braddock, Pa.* *JOHN C. FLYGARE.*

GETS GOOD TRADES

Dear Editor:

I must let you know of the great pleasure I get reading ACE-HIGH. The stories are all thrillers, in fact are something to make you think about. I liked "Gun-Toters of the Steel Trail," "Figure Four Clark," and "Branded," and I believe that in the next issue will be a Northwestern "humdinger" entitled, "Mush, Huskies, Mush!"

I take more pleasure in reading Northern and Western stories than love, dancing and other stories of this type. I also get good trades out of "The Country Store" which is published in ACE-HIGH. I cannot praise ACE-HIGH any too much.

I'm closing this letter with wishing ACE-HIGH and all its friends and readers a prosperous New Year.

Very sincerely yours,
985 *Humboldt Blvd., Milwaukee, Wisc.* *LYNN LIEDNER.*

FINDS ACE-HIGH THRILLING

Dear Editor:

ACE-HIGH is some magazine! The stories are all very thrilling, the kind I like.

I am a girl of sixteen, considered pretty, with auburn curly hair and blue-green eyes. I am quite tall and slender. Would readers of your magazine, boys and girls, write to me, especially those from the West? I like all forms of outdoor sports, dancing, reading and story writing. I am interested in art and music too. In fact, anything interests me, so you see I ought to prove a nice correspondent. I should like college boys or girls from all over to write to me too.

Just a girl reader of ACE-HIGH,
ETHEL M. OLSON.

23 First St., Woodlawn, N. Y.

FROM A COW WADDY

Dear Editor:

I have been reading your magazine for some time and would like to say that I think it is one of the best I have ever read. I want to congratulate you on your good work.

I also would like to hear from some of your girl readers, so will you please print this letter. I have been a cow waddy for about eighteen years, so I will be able to tell something of the times I spent on the ranges, which might be of some interest to some of the folks in the East.

So if you will print my letter I will sure be obliged to you, and wishing ACE-HIGH the best of luck, I remain,

Very truly yours.
F. H. McDERMOTT.

Box 51, Granite, Idaho.

NO SCENERY DESCRIPTIONS FOR HIM!

Dear Editor:

Having read ACE-HIGH for over a year I feel safe in saying that it is the best. Its stories are not dragging or boring as others are, which do too much describing of the scenery instead of getting down to the real thing. I have been going to write to you for some time, but not being so good at pushing a pen I fell off the idea. But the stories you have been putting in lately compel me to write and congratulate you on the good work done by the authors of the stories. My favorites are J. Edward Leithead, R. Cummins, W. C. MacDonald, and Ray Nafziger. Now I guess I'll bring this spiel to a close. Insert it if it is any use to you. Also, I would like some of your buddies to write me if they care to.

Sincerely,
JAMES CUNLIFFE.

5 Sunny Bank,
Stoneclough, Manchester, England.

ACE-HIGH STORIES MOST REALISTIC

Dear Editor:

I wish to take this opportunity to express my appreciation of the magazines that come under the Clayton Wedge, for the stories in your mags. are the most realistic I have found. You certainly have a bunch of authors who know how to write real stories. Most magazines publish stories that are worse than child stories, the hero doing the impossible and all that, but your writers seem to have a special brand that is good to the last word. Through your "Around the Stove" dept. I would like to ask for letters from Indian or Spanish girls who still have the old roaming disposition and are not light-headed flappers like the up-to-date girls. I hope to get many letters and wish for the greatest success to the Clayton Wedge and its writers. May they live long to give us many of the good stories all red-blooded people enjoy. Oh yes, I forgot; I'm 27 years old, 5 ft. 10 in., and have dark hair and gray eyes. Here's to your ever-growing magazines, from one who has traveled the West.

HENRY PATTON.

115 Green St., Dayton, Ohio.

FROM A WANDERER

Dear Editor:

I have been a constant reader of your great magazine ever since September, 1921. I have never missed an issue. I have bought it at newsstands all over the U. S. I bought my first number in Ogden, Utah, and later wrote you a letter. While I was in Roy, Utah, I read a story in ACE-HIGH entitled "Gun Gospel," by W. D. Hoffman. I can gladly say that the same story is now in book form and I have the book. I also read a story by name "The Fiddler's Kid." If you have a copy of this story, please publish it again.

I have read Cowboy Stories, Western Stories, Lariat, Ranch Romances, and a number of others, but have thrown them all away for ACE-HIGH. I read the "Shootin' Fool From Texas" last winter. It was sure a rip-snorter.

I have just got through with Larry Ormaz and old Bill Randal working for the A. J. and S. F. It sure was a cracker-jack. Hoffman, Tyler, and Leithead can't be beat, also the other writers. I have started "The Colorado Streak," and sure do aim to finish it or bust a tug.

Well if there are any of the readers who want to know anything about the Oklahoma oil fields or about me in any way, I'll be glad to correspond. I have traveled through 38 states, am 20 years old, have blond hair and gray eyes, and am 5 ft. 11 in. tall. Would gladly answer all letters from either sex, but really I prefer the fair sex, as I am a boy.

From the Rambling Kid,
B. W. BLOOMFIELD.

Brice, Mo.

REMEMBER A STORY THREE YEARS

Dear Editor:

I have been a constant reader of ACE-HIGH since 1922, and have seen many good stories in it, but there are just two of them that have caught my eye very much. One of them was called "Three-Gun Shorty," or something like that. It was published some three years ago, and was written by Culpepper Chunn.

The other one was published in January and was called "Sleeping Six-Guns, and written by William Colt MacDonald.

I have seen good stories, but these two beat all of them.

Another thing I like to say is that I would like to correspond with readers of ACE-HIGH magazine. Any sex. I am 18 years old, 5 ft. 10 in. tall, have brown eyes and dark hair, can speak Spanish, and like to read and shoot and answer letters. Hoping I am not putting you to too much trouble, I remain,

Yours very truly,
JESS RAMEREZ.

Box 15, Pauline, Kans.

LIKES LEITHEAD'S VIRILE PEN

Dear Editor:

As an enthusiastic reader of your wonderfully fine magazine of Western "literature," I am keenly alive to the fact that the two issues appear on the newsstands of Philadelphia about the 5th and 20th instants respectively. I placed the word "literature" in quotes, for the stories are really word-pictures of the old West, drawn, so to speak, by experts in their line.

There is one writer who certainly has my vote of appreciation every time he makes his appearance on your pages. I have in hand the First February Number, and turning to page 391, "In Our Next Issue," I sure was disappointed not to find there the name of J. Edward Leithead.

When it comes to a smashing, true-to-facts drama of Western delineation the aforesaid J. E. L. hits the bull's-eye every shot, in my estimation. So please serve my favorite dish as often as you can. I am confident your doing so will meet with the hearty approval of a majority of your readers—those who unhesitatingly know the story with a "punch" from beginning to end, one ever true to facts, as they existed "away out yonder in the good old days when the six-gun was the law of the land."

It may interest you to know that I am holding, for rereading, those back-number issues containing Leithead stories. I know I shall enjoy them over again.

Long flourish Leithead and his virile pen! And that's that.

Yours very truly,
BEN F. PRESS.

3432 N. Bodine St., Philadelphia, Pa.

ANY LETTERS FOR A SOLDIER?

Dear Editor:

As you can see by my address, I am quite a ways off from the States, so that I am a little late in getting issues of your magazine. But that only enhances the joy of reading ACE-HIGH when I do get it.

Having noticed your "Around the Stove" department, I have often wondered if I could make some pen pals through its medium. That is the main reason for this letter.

I have been through the Panama Canal twice and have spent a few days in Honolulu. Have also spent considerable time in the Northwest country of the States. Maybe someone would like to have some information on the foregoing places. Letters from one and all, either sex, would be very much appreciated, and I promise to answer each and every one.

Sincerely yours,
(PVT.) DAVID FACTOR.

Hdq. Co., 24th Brigade,
Fort Santiago, Manila, P. I.

Fisherman Says He Never Gets a "Bite" From This Tobacco

However, it helps him get the kind of "bites" he wants

The sport of fishing seems to enlarge men's souls, despite all the fish stories we hear. Let a man find a hole where the fish are biting well, and nine times out of ten, if he is a true sportsman, he will let his friends in on the good news.

Evidently the same thing holds true of pipe-smokers. Take the case of Mr. Massey, for example. He has learned from a fellow fisherman how good Edgeworth is, and now wants to tell the world about it himself.

Jasper, Tenn.,
March 23, 1927

Larus & Bro. Co.,
Richmond, Va.
Gentlemen:

I have always wanted to smoke a pipe. After several attempts I gave my "taste" up, for with each trial I got a blistered tongue.

One evening, when looking over a certain outdoor magazine, I read that a certain fisherman could catch more fish when using "Edgeworth," so I decided I would try "his" tobacco—for I am no poor fisherman!

The next day I tried to secure Edgeworth. The local country storekeeper did not have it, so I sent by a friend to the city for my first Edgeworth. Two things have happened: I still smoke Edgeworth, and the local storekeeper always has a supply.

I catch fish and *never get* "a bite" from Edgeworth!

Yours for keeps,
H. V. Massey

To those who have never tried Edgeworth, we make this offer:

Let us send you free samples of Edgeworth so that you may put it to the pipe test. If you like the samples, you'll like Edgeworth wherever and whenever you buy it, for it never changes in quality.

Write your name and address to Larus & Brother Company, 26 S. 21st Street, Richmond, Va.

We'll be grateful for the name and address of your tobacco dealer, too, if you care to add them.

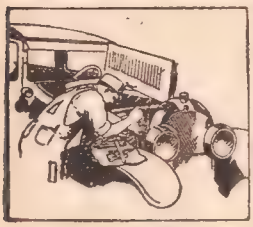
Edgeworth is sold in various sizes to suit the needs and means of all purchasers. Both Edgeworth Plug Slice and Edgeworth Ready-Rubbed are packed in small, pocket-size packages, in handsome humidors, holding a pound, and also in several handy in-between sizes.

To Retail Tobacco Merchants: If your jobber cannot supply you with Edgeworth, Larus & Brother Company will gladly send you prepaid by parcel post a one- or two-dozen carton of any size of Edgeworth Plug Slice or Edgeworth Ready-Rubbed for the same price you would pay the jobber.

On your radio—tune in on WRVA, Richmond, Va. —the Edgeworth Station. Wave length 256.1. meters. Frequency 1180 kilocycles.

AUTO
BOOKS SENT FREE!

Mail the coupon and we'll send you a set of these remarkable auto books, just off the press. Whether you are mechanic or helper, expert or student, auto-owner or driver, if you're interested in autos, by all means take advantage of this opportunity to see the latest and most complete work on autos we have ever published. Built by eighteen of America's greatest automotive engineers. Simple enough for men with little schooling to understand, yet in daily use by hundreds of engineers, service station superintendents and foremen as an authoritative REFERENCE Cyclopedia.



CAN YOU FIX IT?

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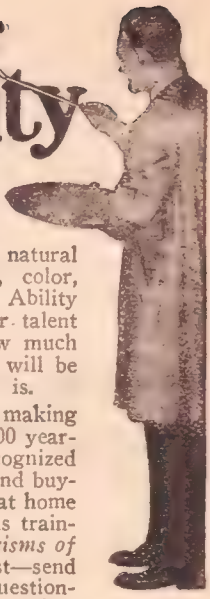

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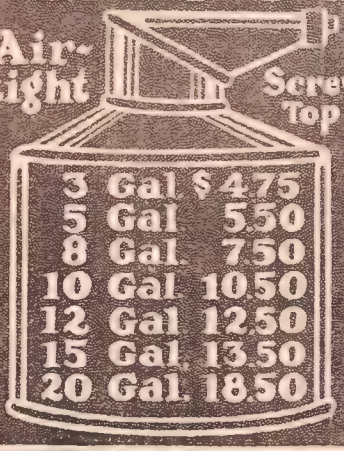

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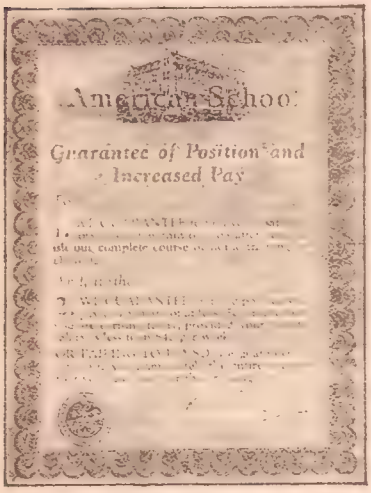

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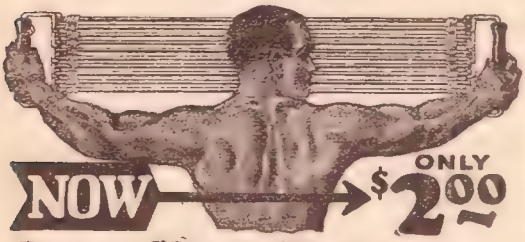

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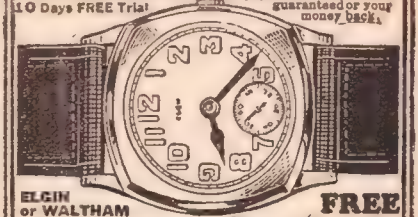

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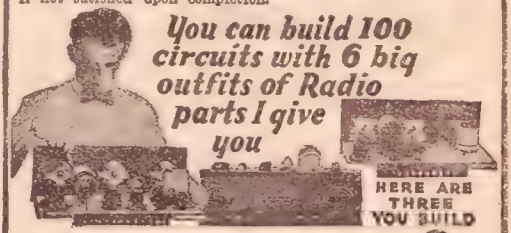

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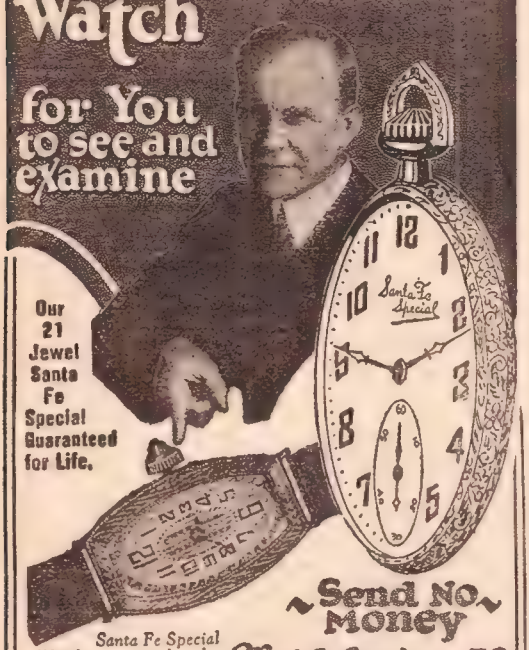

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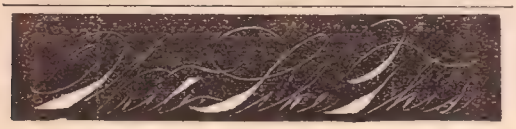

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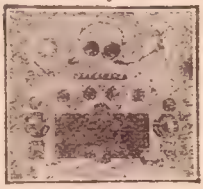

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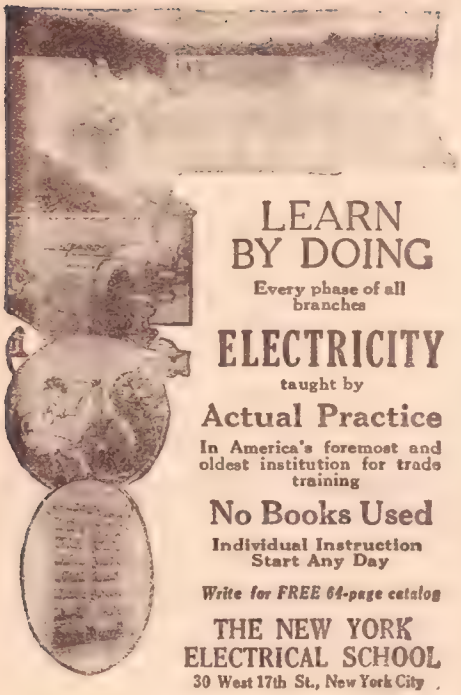

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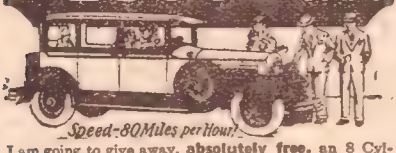

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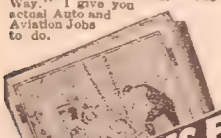

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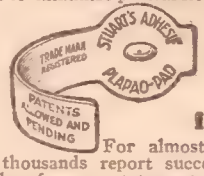

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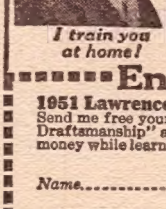

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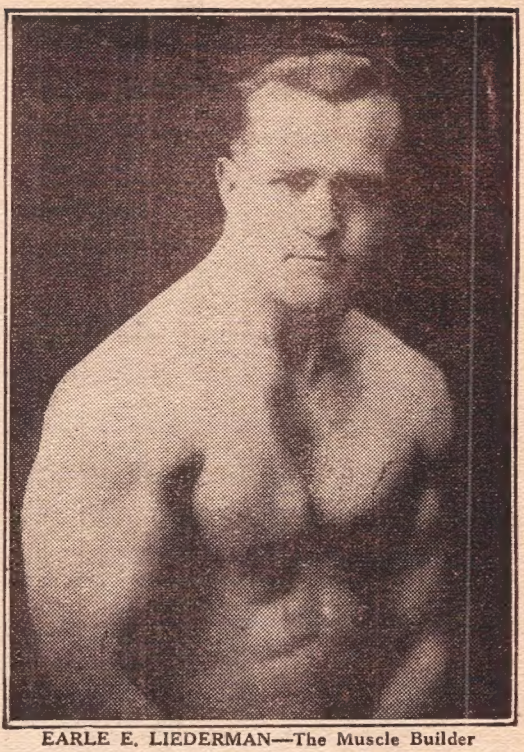

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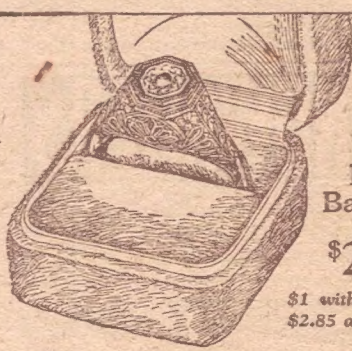

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